

The First Major Reform: Mikhail Gorbachev's Anti-Alcohol Policies in the 1980s

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In the 1980s, the administration of General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev devised an anti-alcohol campaign that would have devastating results for the Soviet Union. In his memoirs, Gorbachev explains that he was coined the “Mineral Water Secretary” following a “sinister chain” of consequences to his 1985 alcohol reform. Gorbachev conceded that “the negative consequences of the anti-alcohol campaign greatly exceeded its positive aspects.”¹ Which factors allowed Gorbachev to achieve limited successes with his alcohol reforms, and which led to its ultimate failure? This paper will investigate Gorbachev’s anti-alcohol policies beyond their categorization as a failure. It will also explore the tensions and problems that arose through Gorbachev’s anti-alcohol campaign by examining the shifting perspectives on alcohol consumption, the motivations for reform, the changes in alcohol production due to prohibition, and the political reception of the policy.

A shift in the view of alcoholism in the Soviet Union is an important reason for the implementation of Gorbachev’s campaign against alcohol. Since the 1950s, alcohol consumption had been rising in the Soviet Union. By 1980, the annual average consumption of pure alcohol was fifteen litres per person of at least fifteen years old.² Almost two-thirds of the alcohol consumed in the Soviet Union was vodka or other strong alcoholic beverages. Another factor relating to shifting perspectives regarding alcohol consumption was an invigorated academic interest in the effects of alcohol. In the late 1970s, sociologists and medical scholars began researching the detriments of alcoholism.³ Moreover, research by Soviet economists also contributed to perspectives turning against alcohol; these economists researched alcohol’s detrimental social impacts on the Soviet economy.⁴ The economic perspective was significant as it countered the view of alcohol revenues as being indispensable to Soviet society. The

¹ Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 221-222.

² This statistic was derived from the combination of all alcoholic drinks.

³ Daniel Tarschys, "The Success of a Failure: Gorbachev's Alcohol Policy, 1985-88," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 45:1 (1993): 16, <https://www-jstor-org.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/stable/153247>.

⁴ Tarschys, 16-17.

supporters of alcohol no longer had the primary role in designing policies relating to alcohol.⁵ Changing social factors such as the rise in alcoholism and more extensive research based on the negative impacts of alcoholism were important to the implementation of Gorbachev's alcohol policies.

The reception of these social changes was also important, and the reception largely involved the political context of the early 1980s. Although some scholars have argued for the relative insignificance of the interregnum period (1982-1985), Mark Schrad, a historian who has written about the history of vodka in the Soviet Union, argues that this period was important to the development of “vodka politics.” Schrad argues that this period—from the death of Leonid Brezhnev to the rise of Gorbachev—was instrumental in distinguishing between the “wet” (drinkers) and “dry” (non- or moderate drinkers) members of Soviet leadership.⁶ After the death of Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov was elected general secretary of the Soviet Union, and his rise to power marked a shift in the Soviet policy towards alcohol, which had previously been dominated by moderates.⁷ Andropov had considered efforts against corruption a priority, and Gorbachev continued this emphasis with his focus on morality, discipline, and moderation.⁸ Andropov launched a labour-discipline campaign in his first policy address, which included anti-alcohol efforts wherein he organized surprise visits to factories in order to decrease workplace drunkenness.⁹ Andropov also lowered the price of vodka in an effort to decrease the consumption of *samogon*—illicitly distilled vodka. Along with Andropov's own efforts, he promoted young, “dry” reformers such as Yegor Ligachev and Gorbachev himself.

⁵ Tarschys, 20.

⁶ Mark Lawrence Schrad, *Vodka Politics: Alcohol, Autocracy, and the Secret History of the Russian State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 256.

⁷ Tarschys, 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹ Schrad, 257.

Although there was a lapse in concerted anti-alcohol efforts under the leadership of Konstantin Chernenko, Andropov's successor, the political audience was nonetheless more receptive to Gorbachev's later campaign against alcohol because of Andropov's position.¹⁰ The beginning of Andropov's reforms against alcohol was a significant indicator of a changing political context from the time of Brezhnev. Perhaps more important to the implementation of the 1985 campaign against alcohol was Andropov's support of politicians, like Gorbachev, who emphasized the detrimental effects of alcohol on Soviet society.¹¹ Six weeks after Gorbachev assumed the role of general secretary in 1985, the front page of *Pravda* announced his anti-alcohol campaign.¹² This was the first great initiative of Gorbachev's administration.¹³ The new alcohol restrictions greatly impacted the social life of Soviets. The campaign entailed the creation of a national temperance society, the expansion of medical treatment facilities and recreational outlets, and the restriction of alcohol production and sales. The number of alcohol retail outlets and their hours were decreased, and this reduction along with other restrictions led to long lines of discontented customers waiting to buy alcohol.¹⁴ Laws meant to reduce home brewing and the consumption of *samogon* were also strengthened; these laws stipulated that the manufacture or possession of *samogon* or distilling equipment could result in two years in a labour camp or a three-hundred-ruble fine. Schrad writes that Gorbachev's campaign against alcohol was the most comprehensive since efforts made in the 1920s.¹⁵ However, the extensive nature of Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaign was an important factor in its ultimate failure.

Gorbachev's campaign against alcohol not only was more comprehensive than previous reforms, it also contained different characteristics from previous policies. In contrast to other

¹⁰ Schrad, 258.

¹¹ Ibid., 259-260.

¹² Ibid., 263.

¹³ William Taubman, *Gorbachev: His Life and Times* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 2017), 233.

¹⁴ Schrad, 263.

¹⁵ Ibid., 264.

policies against alcohol, Soviet politicians were also expected to adhere to the reforms. Alcoholism could have also been used as a way to purge opposition from the Soviet leadership: Gorbachev's former rival and heavy drinker Grigory Romanov was dismissed from his political position during the first week of Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaign. *Glasnost*, denoting openness, was another important aspect of the Gorbachev administration that related to vodka.¹⁶ *Glasnost* involved the publication of long-suppressed social statistics, including the reports of the 1985 progress towards fulfilling the Five-Year Plan. Released in January 1986, these reports acknowledged for the first time that alcoholic beverages were sold in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the 1985 abstract released alcohol sales figures; these statistics demonstrated that alcohol sales represented a quarter of all retail trade in the Soviet Union. Other publications released statistical information about abortions, crime, suicides, and executions.¹⁷ *Glasnost* was unprecedented in the Soviet Union as it required the acknowledgement of social problems and lapses in progress. Through *glasnost*, Gorbachev communicated the economic problems that he planned to address through *perestroika*, or economic restructuring.¹⁸ *Glasnost* and *perestroika* were paramount to the campaign's new approach.

Gorbachev, along with others, largely recognized the negative impacts of alcohol while attributing little significance to its value as a cultural symbol. The drug historian David Courtwright explains that drunkenness was a "society-wide calamity" in the Soviet Union by the 1980s.¹⁹ Courtwright states that alcohol increased divorce, road deaths, industrial accidents, accidental fires, crime, mental deficiencies, and premature mortality.²⁰ In 1985, a group of scientists declared the annual social cost of alcohol to be 180 billion rubles, as drunkenness decreased the productivity of labourers. This figure was approximately four times

¹⁶ Schrad, 264.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁹ David T. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 196.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

the amount of revenue derived from the sale of alcohol.²¹ Although the reforms promised solutions to the social adversities associated with drunkenness, the overall reaction to the campaign was negative. Courtwright states that millions of citizens drank to combat boredom. Alcohol was also a strong cultural characteristic, and the people were deprived of this cultural commodity without, in many cases, the consumer goods to replace it. Vodka was intertwined with Soviet society, and the reaction of the citizens reflected this close relationship between alcohol and Soviet culture.²² A 1989 poster with the slogan exclaiming “Bring back the good old Brezhnev days!” illustrates the resistance to Gorbachev’s anti-alcohol campaign.²³ The population’s desire to return to the “Brezhnev days” when alcohol was more easily accessed heavily contrasts with Gorbachev’s memoirs, wherein he laments that Brezhnev had ignored the problem of alcoholism and let the people suffer from their drunkenness.²⁴ In short, Gorbachev’s anti-alcohol campaign largely ignored (or at least underestimated) the cultural significance of alcohol in the Soviet Union, and this oversight resulted in a population wrought with discontent.

Gorbachev’s focus on morality was another factor that impacted his alcohol campaign and view of alcohol in relation to culture. In his projection of a stark perspective regarding alcoholism, Gorbachev perpetuates a discourse that encompasses views of natural inequality between alcoholics and non-alcoholics. Gorbachev wrote about what he believed to be the causes of drunkenness in his memoirs:

There were many causes for the widespread drunkenness: poor living conditions, the difficulty of everyday life, cultural backwardness. Many drank because of the impossibility of realizing their potential, of saying what they thought. The oppressive social atmosphere pushed weak natures to use alcohol to drown their feelings of inferiority and their fear of harsh reality. The example of the leaders, who paid lavish tribute to the ‘green snake’ of alcohol, also had a bad effect.²⁵

²¹ Ibid., 197.

²² Courtwright, 199.

²³ Ibid., 198.

²⁴ Gorbachev, 220-221.

²⁵ Gorbachev, 220.

With moralizing language, Gorbachev painted a stark picture of reasons that one might become addicted to alcohol. The idea of “cultural backwardness” resulting in alcoholism implies a point of view asserting cultural superiority.²⁶ The patronizing tone of Gorbachev’s writing regarding the causes of alcoholism demonstrates that Gorbachev did not attribute the same cultural value to vodka and alcohol as the Soviet people did. Gorbachev viewed alcoholism as a vice for those with “weak natures.”²⁷ Given the widespread influence of alcohol in the Soviet Union, Gorbachev placed a large number of people into the category of those with weaker natures. Finally, Gorbachev also acknowledged that alcoholism impacted the political elite, and in his acknowledgment, he demonized alcohol by referring to it as the “green snake.” From the discourse of Gorbachev and other reformers such as Ligachev, it is evident that economic revitalization was not the sole motivation for the anti-alcohol campaign. Ideas concerning morality were also significant reasons for the reform.²⁸

Although Gorbachev and members of his administration began the anti-alcohol campaign with a strong moral focus, they responded to some significant social problems and encountered some initial successes. The alcohol reforms are credited with decreasing mortality rates in the Soviet Union.²⁹ By the year of 1989, the consumption rate per capita of alcohol decreased from 14.9 to 12.5 litres.³⁰ The life expectancy in the Soviet Union increased, and the anti-alcohol reforms were credited with saving up to a million lives. The successes, however, paled in comparison to the negative economic outcomes of the campaign. With alcohol’s limited availability and higher taxes, many turned to *samogon*. The Russian journalist Leonid Ionin explained that the Russian state “created two hundred million criminals” by implementing alcohol reforms that turned people to home brewing for

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Gorbachev, 220.

²⁸ Schrad, 271.

²⁹ Jay Bhattacharya, Christina Gathmann, and Grant Miller, "The Gorbachev Anti-Alcohol Campaign and Russia's Mortality Crisis," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 5:2 (2013): 256, <http://www.jstor.org/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/stable/43189436>.

³⁰ Schrad, 276.

an alcohol supply.³¹ Many lives were lost due to alcohol poisoning from the high alcohol content of *samogon*. Others were poisoned when they drank substances such as brake fluid or mouthwash as an alternative to alcohol.³² Gorbachev's alcohol campaigns also forced casual drinkers to wait in line for long periods of time in order to procure alcohol for holidays or special occasions.³³ Thus, there was ambiguity in Gorbachev's alcohol reforms.³⁴ Were the reforms meant to promote abstinence or merely moderation in regards to alcohol? While Gorbachev denounced drunkenness, moderate drinkers (such as Gorbachev himself) faced difficulties in buying alcohol for special occasions. In times of economic hardship, the loss of revenue from vodka sales exacerbated economic difficulties including the falling price of oil, the cost of the Chernobyl disaster, and the expense of an Armenian earthquake.³⁵ By 1989, the Politburo had reversed the alcohol reforms, but hyperinflation prevented an economic recovery based on the revenue from the renewed surge of licit alcohol sales.³⁶ Although the anti-alcohol campaign experienced initial successes, its negative outcomes far outweigh the positive.

Gorbachev's "sinister chain" of outcomes from his anti-alcohol campaign were a result of different political, cultural, and economic factors relating to the policies.³⁷ Andropov's support of anti-alcohol measures allowed Gorbachev a more receptive, "dry" audience for his later campaign against alcohol. Gorbachev's alcohol reform was comprehensive and unique in Soviet history, but there remained cultural and economic problems that prevented its successful implementation. Gorbachev recognized drunkenness as a scourge on society, but he did not adequately account for the cultural benefits of alcohol. Furthermore, the implementation of Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaign penalized moderate

³¹ Ibid., 277.

³² Ibid., 282.

³³ Schrad, 278.

³⁴ Courtwright, 197.

³⁵ Schrad, 280.

³⁶ Ibid., 282-283.

³⁷ Gorbachev, 221.

drinkers in its effort to root out drunkenness. The reforms against alcohol resulted in hyperinflation, as there was a loss of vodka revenues and the underground economy flourished with home brewing. While the anti-alcohol campaign ended as a failure, the characterization of the campaign as a failure and the factors that inhibited its success are important to understanding the Soviet Union under Gorbachev in the 1980s.

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