

Russia, temperance movement, 1858–1860

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Before 1712, the Russian alcohol market operated under state monopoly for the benefit of large agricultural interests. Peter the Great annulled the state monopoly and alcohol concessions became an exclusive mechanism of alcohol supply and retail for more than 150 years to 1863.

Every four years, the government arranged alcohol auctions. Concessionaires bid for the rights to retail alcohol, charging the price that not only covered their investment but also made them a quick fortune. Economically, concessions were very effective, contributing to almost 40 percent of the Russian budget. For consumers, the concession system was a burden and meant economic hardship. Vodka, consumed more than any other alcohol product, was considered out of the price range of average peasants, and in many cases it was adulterated. Despite the rise in prices and concern as to its authenticity, liquor retailing was ubiquitous and taverns mushroomed, reaching 77,386 by 1860. Alcoholism plagued Russia, causing massive poverty and degradation.

The Crimean War from 1853 to 1856 depleted Russian finances and in order to raise

revenues, the government increased the auction price of alcohol by 40 million rubles. In a chain reaction, concessionaires raised retail prices by nearly three times – from 3.5 rubles to 8 to 10 rubles for a bucket of vodka. In turn, mass anger led to the formation of the temperance movement. The movement emerged in Russia's western provinces as entire villages ruled to abstain from drinking while picketing liquor establishments. By 1859, temperance committees spread across 32 Russian provinces.

As alcohol sales plummeted, retail prices dropped to 0.5 rubles a bucket, and in some localities retailers offered vodka free. But protests nonetheless gained momentum as 220 drinking shops were destroyed during the summer of 1859. The government arrested 780 people in an attempt to prevent the movement from expanding. However, because of widespread opposition, it was forced to replace its alcohol concessions with an excise tax on January 1, 1863.

SEE ALSO: Bulavin's Rebellion, 1707–1708; Decembrists to the Rise of Russian Marxism; Pugachev's Rebellion, 1773–1775

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