

RUSSIAN SIBERIANS OF THE

A. CH. ELERT



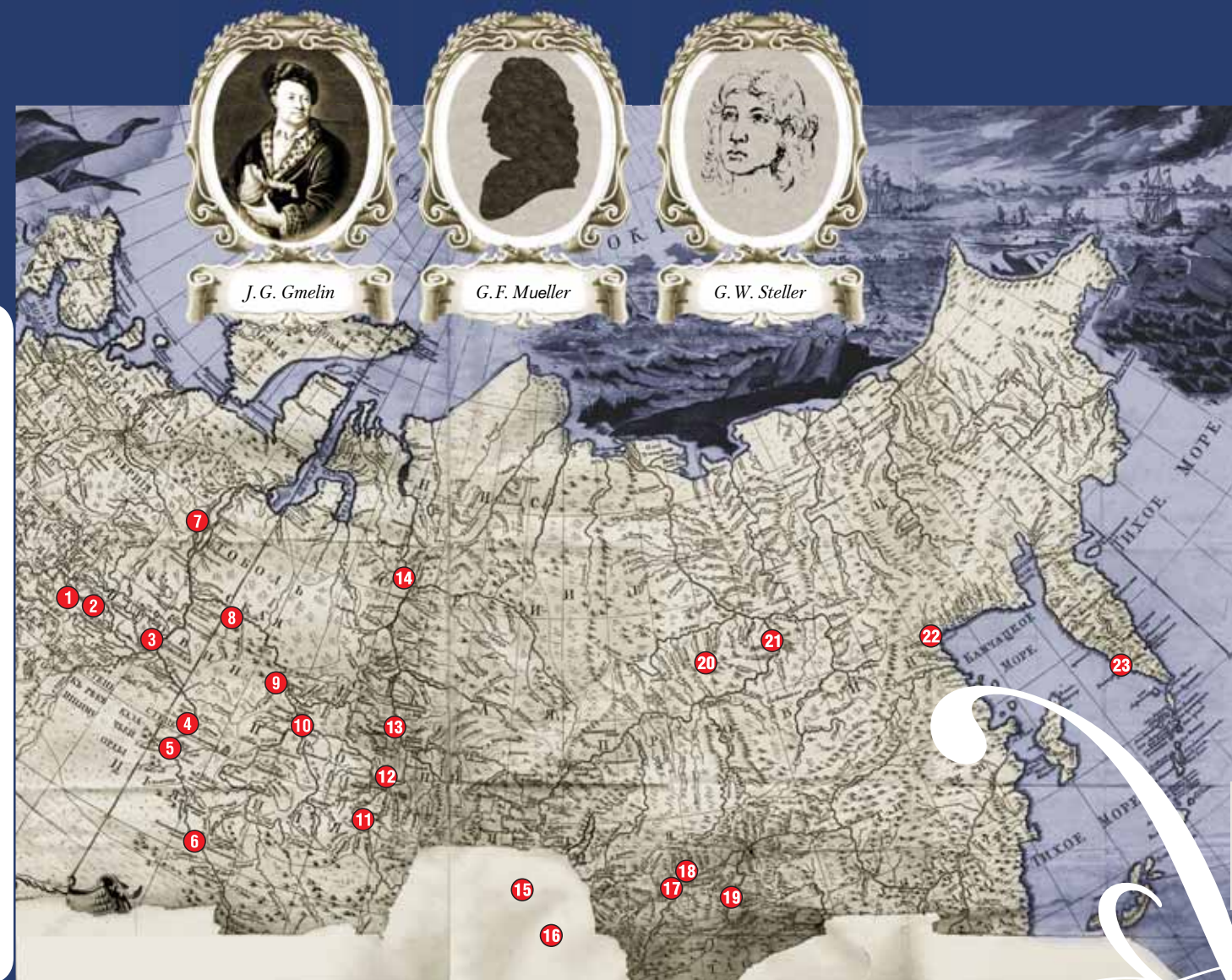
Documents left by the members of the academic detachment of the Second Kamchatka expedition (1733–1743), a journey of scientific exploration through Siberia, contain a lot of curious evidence of the manners and customs of the Russian and indigenous population of Siberia. Some historians studying these documents have made comments to the effect that foreign members of the expedition had displayed a negative attitude toward the Siberian way of life, whose most vivid manifestations were mass alcoholism, laziness, irresponsibility and money-grubbing. It is no accident that alcoholism comes first in this list – the myth that it is an integral feature of the Russian character is of very long standing.

Let us make an attempt to look without prejudice upon the evidence left by the famous travelers and see how they

interpreted their own observations. We should bear in mind, though, that these observations were not completely impartial – the members of the expedition were not determined teetotalers. The academic detachment always had a good stock of liquor – vodka and European wines, especially Rhine wine. Another important comment is that the travelers were very different characters, and their views on liquor and drinking were not the same, which is probably explained by the differences in their origin, status, social and cultural background and individualities.

For example, G. F. Mueller, whose father was the rector of a gymnasium, and J. G. Gmelin, coming from the family with many generations of doctors and apothecaries, were brought up in the Protestant spirit of moderation and decency. This explains their affection for European

18TH CENTURY AND ALCOHOLISM



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|------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Yekaterinburg | 8. Surgut | 15. Irkutsk | 22. Okhotsk |
| 2. Tumen | 9. Narym | 16. Kiakhtinskaya sloboda | 23. Petropavlovsk |
| 3. Tobolsk | 10. Tomsk | 17. Chitinsky ostrog | |
| 4. Tara | 11. Abakansky ostrog | 18. Nerchinsk | |
| 5. Omsk | 12. Krasnoyarsk | 19. Argunsky ostrog | |
| 6. Semipalatinsk | 13. Yeniseysk | 20. Ilimsk | |
| 7. Berezov | 14. Mangasea | 21. Yakutsk | |

Generally speaking, nothing in history happens by accident. Any event is linked to other events of the past and of the future with numerous threads; all the occurrences are interconnected and interacting. And yet, you may have an impression that some decisive historic situations spring up all of a sudden, as though by pure chance... Somebody said or did something, or led the troops to a wrong place, or woke up in a bad mood one morning — and this becomes a starting point of a new epoch. There have been a lot of such situations in Russia's history; in fact, such a situation marks the very beginning of the Russian state — choice of the official religion. According to the "Tale of Time Years"¹, Russia could just as well have accepted Judaism or Islam. It was the legendary words said by Vladimir Krasno Sonyshko² to the effect that we, Russians, drink to make merry and cannot live without it that made us Christians of the Greek type. Vladimir died when his time came; but his "drinking manifesto" has been chanted for hundreds of years and became an inexhaustible source of myths, new theories and their disproof, and regrets. "Merrymaking" does not appear that merry, after all, and smells strongly of squabbling, grief, decline and tragedy. Moreover, they say that Russians become hopeless drunkards, and because of it the country's future is a problem, if there is a future at all.

This article will show our readers that the Russian people "took to the bottle" three centuries ago, which, however, did not prevent them from spreading over the vast area and building a most powerful empire in the world history. There is something wrong about it — too much passion in these talks about the "universal alcoholism" of Russians and too many extreme views. Our compatriots have long gotten used to treating vodka as something almost sacred, something exclusively Russian, but in the last fifteen years they have been able to compare. The comparison proves paradoxical — Europeans drink at least as much as we do but liquor is not a domineering feature of their national character.

A vivid illustration of this psychological dilemma is the experience of the academic detachment of the Second Kamchatka expedition. Overseas scholars who were members of this expedition did not abstain from vodka or wine, but their "cultured drinking" was a far cry from the heavy drinking of Russian Siberians — or are we, once again, under the influence of a stereotype? Georg Wilhelm Steller, one of the foreign members of the expedition, was a man on a large scale, instable and uncontrollable, and he preferred vodka to any other drink. He was on backslapping terms with big shots and insignificant people alike, but if he saw deception, he started crashing everything around him without any regard for ranks or distinctions. He looked like a blunt Russian grenadier whose battlefield was scholarly research. G. W. Steller is a good example of how real life can ruin stereotypes.

We should bear it in mind when we study the documents produced by the members of the Second Kamchatka expedition concerning the role of liquor in the life of the 18th century Siberians. If we look at these materials through the distorting glass of "national" stereotypes, we can, once again, put our foot in it. These stereotypes have done enough harm already as they are the reason why the legacy of the greatest scholars Johann Georg Gmelin and Gerhardt Friedrich Mueller was not given due credit. Moreover, their works aroused suspicion. The scholars were suspected of Russophobia: Gmelin's Travel through Siberia was reproached for mocking Russian people and Mueller's dissertation was condemned for "finding faults" with Russians and "looking for stains on Russian clothes".

How much truth and how much exaggeration did these accusations hold? The scholars' texts abounding in considerations about Russian alcoholism will help answer this question. A story that speaks for itself is that of Gmelin's visit to a factory near Irkutsk where vodka and alcohol were made. The scholar gave advice on improving the technology and heard back, "We don't need your advice. We make it as our grandfathers did it, and will continue this way." Here comes the stereotype: Protestants' passion for improving life is ruined by Russian inertness and laziness. And this is not true because back in those times Gmelin was not the only one to propose rational innovations. We had, among others, Lomonosov, who was Russian all right. People fall into categories, in the first place, on the basis of their ability to do anything as best as they can, and this does not depend on the nationality. Certainly, national habits should be taken into account but it is shaky ground. We can only be certain of one thing: any national type is a cross-breed between the dark and the light sides of folk life, and the ratio between the two can hardly be calculated arithmetically — this issue is much more complicated.

The following text, which is devoted to the analysis of a sore subject of Russian life by great scholars of the 18th century, is highly instructive and educational. It continues the series of publications about the "Russian" Germans Gmelin, Mueller and Steller and, apart from shedding more light on some highly interesting historic phenomena, it helps us get better acquainted with these remarkable people by peeling off the common prejudice. Such an acquaintance brings history closer to us and makes it more transparent and living.

A. Panfilov

wines — in fact, "affection" is too strong a word as wine for them was a medicine and a stimulant in the first place. In a word, these two scholars displayed a rational attitude to alcoholic liquor, as becomes proper Protestants. The first story in support of this view belongs to Mueller. According to him, he was invited to take part in the expedition to replace Gmelin, who had taken gravely ill. One night, when despaired Gmelin was alone at home, he drank a bottle of the best Rhine wine...and felt much better in a few days. Mueller believed his colleague's story with one exception — he had strong doubts that Gmelin had confined himself to one bottle only.

Adjunct G. W. Steller was a very different person. His democratic origin (his father was a cantor and an organist), impulsive and adventurous nature, sociable and undemanding character agree well with his drinking preferences. Gmelin remarked, in his reference on Steller, that Steller drank beer, honey and vodka but never wine. In his *Description of Kamchatka* Steller confessed, "I don't get drunk on Rhine wine here because you cannot find it in Kamchatka, and I would be distressed if it were otherwise." Describing all sort of difficult situations he had on his way from Yakutsk to Kamchatka, Steller mentioned that a large part of his luggage was lost when crossing the river. The loss was worth about 100 rubles but most of all Steller lamented over "two buckets of double vodka that cost, together with delivery, about 30 rubles in local prices". The only bottle he managed to save "was drunk together with the suite to say good-bye to the bottles lost". He ordered "to hang it up in a tree like a shaman's tambourine".

When drunk, Steller sometimes lost the sense of decorum and asked for trouble. One time he informed on the Vice-Governor of Irkutsk L. Lang accusing him of evil intentions against the tsar. Interestingly, it all happened out of the blue — before the incident, the vice-governor and the scholar had been on friendly terms. Lang made a great effort to calm down Steller and hush up this business which could have brought trouble to both of them. We should note, to be fair, that Steller's sprees, which happened oftener in the later period of his journey through Siberia, did not affect the quality of his investigations, which were always highly evaluated by the leaders of the expedition and by later researchers alike.

Adjunct Johann E. Fischer's background was similar to Steller's but his character was the exact opposite. Small-minded, rude and suspicious with his inferiors and impossible with his social peers (other scholars or representatives of local authorities), he seemed to be drowning his misanthropy in vodka. It should be mentioned, however, that information on Fischer's drinking mainly came from the Kazaks and soldiers he offended, so it was not completely reliable. Also, there were complaints of a different nature: for example, that he co-habited without marriage with a certain woman and put the soldiers on





killing him. One of the visitors made an insulting gesture to Poliakov, and Poliakov pushed off his hand. The visitors then dragged Poliakov by hair, stamped him, knocked out his eye and broke his head with their heels. Luka Ivanov, who was trying to calm down the debauchers, got away with light injuries.

The above-named Gorlanov continued his drinking escapades during the expedition. In a letter to Gmelin sent in November 1739 from Irkutsk, Steller wrote that during the meeting with Vice-Governor General Major A. Yu. Bibikov the boozed-up student burst into the room, saying he had “an urgent business”. Not only did he ignore Steller’s request to leave the room but made himself comfortable at the table laid for a meal (nobody was having a meal yet) and helped himself to drinks and food. Luckily for Gorlanov, the big chief was in good spirits and treated the student’s behavior, inconceivable in terms of subordination, with humor.

As a rule, Mueller and Gmelin did their best to cut short excessive alcoholic “exercises” of their subordinates by persuasion and punishment, without washing the dirty linen in the public. A rare exception is Mueller’s report to the Irkutsk provincial chancellery in which he asked to suspend paying salary to the geodesist Moisey Ushakov, who, according to the professor, wallowed in sloth, alcoholism and wastefulness. In his “remarkable” (as Gmelin put it) reply to the professors, the geodesist wrote, “if you think that I am a drunkard and a squanderer, I will request the Senate not to not dispatch drunkards and squanderers to perform the business of His Imperial Majesty.” As you can see, Ushakov did not lack for “logics”.

As for the soldiers and Kazaks who accompanied the academic detachment, evidence on their alcoholism is abundant as with these people the “academicians” did not take the trouble of concealing anything. Dozens of reports addressed to local and central authorities tell us, among other things, about opening the professors’ sealed correspondence by a drunk courier (information about the expedition and results of exploration was kept secret), accusing the scholars and their subordinates of state treason, debauching in *kabaks* (taverns) and sodomy.

The expedition’s marine detachments had similar problems. Captain M. Shpanberg wrote to Captain-Komandor Vitus Bering, “My subordinate Andrey Kuzmin, a boat master, does not cope with his duties and does not obey my orders as he is always drunk beyond any measure.” And what was the measure? According to regulations, a private of marine detachments was procured monthly with 16 *charkas* (cups) of vodka (a *charka* contained about 130 milliliters, that is privates were given about 68 milliliters of vodka daily) and 60 mugs of beer (a mug contained about 1.625 liters, that is the average daily norm was 3.2 liters). We have not found any direct reference to liquor consumption quotas for officers, though we can form

guard at her doorstep while he was illegally making vodka and forcing soldiers to help him.

As for the alcoholic preferences of the academic detachment’s auxiliary staff such as artists, geodesists and students, the information we have is scanty. It can be presumed, though, that with them liquor was very popular. By way of example, the students Vasiliy Tretiakov and Alexey Gorlanov caused a stir with the so-called New Year case even before the expedition began. On December 30, 1732 they, together with other students of the Moscow Slavonic-Greek-Latin Academy who were candidates for participation in the expedition, received the advance payment of 2 rubles and decided to “have some fun”. Shortly, the Academy of Sciences received reports from two of its students – one of them, Luka Ivanov, eventually took part in the expedition whilst the other, Andrey Poliakov, never made it to Siberia, in all probability, because of problems with his health. These problems did not spring up by themselves. On the New Year night, Tretiakov, Gorlanov and another six students got very drunk and came to Andrey Poliakov – they bore a grudge against him for not keeping company with them, so they set their minds on



Revellers. Drawing on a box made at P. and A. Lukutinykhs’ factory, 1850s.

a notion of them based on the following well-known fact: in 1733 remuneration of the head of Okhotka port consisted of 300 rubles, 100 *chetverts* of bread and 1,300 liters of vodka, though vodka was meant not only for personal consumption but also for entertaining.

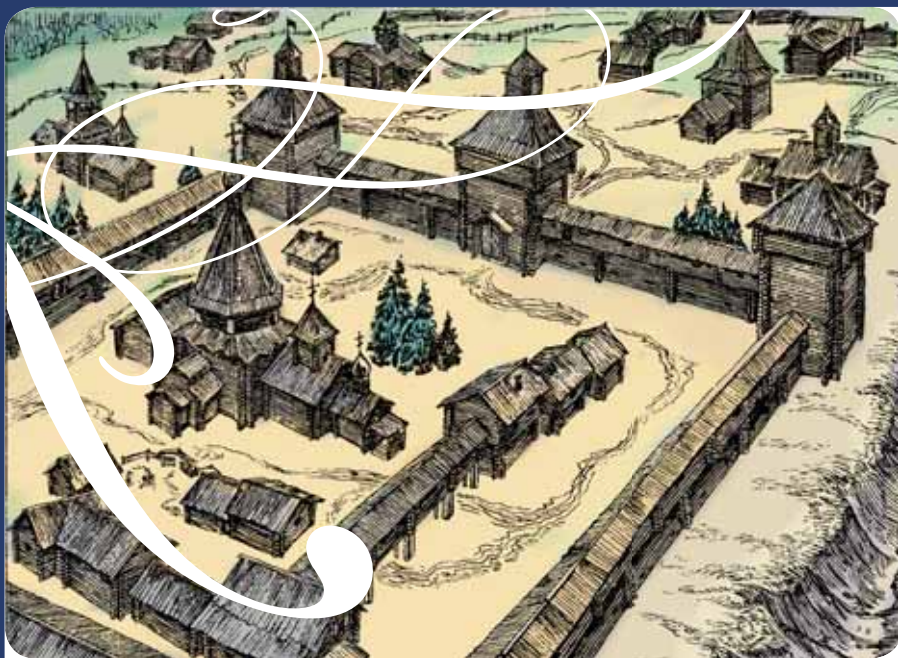
From what was said above, it becomes clear why the scholars of the academic detachment took such an interest in the “alcoholic” sphere of Russian life. Their observations – no matter how subjective they may sometimes seem – are truly invaluable.

Among the Russians inhabiting Siberia, the most popular alcoholic drinks were vodka and beer. Honey was much less popular (it cost three times more than beer, and was produced and sold mainly in the Urals and in West Siberia). Judging by the statistic data collected by Mueller, beer was treated skeptically in North and North-East Siberia. In particular, the scholar got evidence from the chancellery of the Mangasean *voevoda* (governor) that year’s plan for tax from beer sales was 366 rubles but actually nothing was collected. European wines made in Germany (Rhine wines) and in France, though sold in all Siberian cities, were in modest demand and were mostly consumed by aristocrats, officers and merchants.

In fact, “wine” (or “hot wine”) referred to in the documents of that time meant bread vodka in the first place. The technology of its production was worked out at the beginning of the 15th century, and from the middle of the 15th century the Moscow principality began producing it for sale. Raw materials for vodka production were rye and oats flour, rye malt, hop and yeast. The “wine” could be plain and double. Opinions on its strength differ: some researchers believe



Russian 18th c. *lubok* (cheap popular print)



The town of Mangasea.
Reconstruction by I. Rezun,
drawing by A. Zaplavny

that “plain wine” of that epoch was as strong as today’s vodka and “double wine” can be compared to alcohol; others suppose that “plain wine” was about 20 degrees strong while “double wine” was 40–45 degrees. The authors assume that “plain wine” was the product of a single distillation while “double wine” was produced through double distillation.

And this is where evidence supplied by the members of the Second Kamchatka expedition is of vital importance as it can shed some light on this argument. According to this evidence, the retail sale of “double wine” was not common since it was mostly meant for transportation: thanks to the smaller volume, transportation costs were lower. When double wine reached its destination, it was turned into “plain wine” through dilution. For example, the Senate’s decree on fitting out the Second Kamchatka expedition led by V. Bering said, “Until there is bread, double bread wine should be brought from Yakutsk as it is more convenient for transportation, the way they did it in the old times to carry wine from Russia to Siberia. Double wine should then be diluted with boiled water to the strength of plain wine.”

The technology of vodka production was described in detail by Gmelin – to get familiarized with it, Mueller and Gmelin paid a visit to a state distillery located 6 *versts* from Irkutsk. Gmelin wrote: “There are 37 pot stills in a row. The pipes going from the stills (two from each of them) are placed in a trough with fresh flowing water... Vodka runs through the pipes to a tub put for each pair of pipes.

Opposite to the pot stills, on an elevated platform, there are 8 wooden barrels in which malt is fermented. A barrel can hold 147 *poods* (36 lb) of malt, and two barrels are filled with malt simultaneously. When the malt is put into the barrel, boiling water is poured in it so that it covers the malt a few feet above the level of the malt. Boiling water flows from a big tank by a trough; warm water (its volume depends on the time of the year) is then added to the stills to maintain fermentation. This process normally takes three days. When fermentation is over, the barrels are filled with cold water almost to the brim. On the fourth day, the content of the barrels is distilled – it takes 24 hours to make the two barrels empty. The vodka produced is not better or stronger than the milk vodka made by pagans, and probably this is why it is called *araka*, as pagans call their vodka. To turn it into wine, or proper vodka, it is distilled once again; and to make strong vodka (*Spiritus vini rectificatus*), distilling is repeated.”

As we can see, “hard” vodka (“double wine”) was made not by double but by triple distillation. Gmelin, who had a profound knowledge of chemistry, saw lots of drawbacks in the distilling technique described: “If the technique were improved, vodka could cost half the current price. The point is to maintain a certain temperature of fermentation and to eliminate huge loss through evaporation. I went to the room where vodka was stored – it would only take you five minutes to lose consciousness because of alcohol fumes. The tubs to which vodka flows are at least one



Russian *lubok* (cheap popular print) of 18th c.

foot in diameter and have no cover, and the tube is placed about half a foot above the tub. The room where araka is stored looks about the same, and even though the smell is not that strong, you can see how much of the liquid evaporates. Since the malt dregs at the very bottom of the barrel contain most alcohol, it would be reasonable to distill them separately. In this way, you could make vodka right away.” The scholar’s advice was not made use of – in his notes, he complained that “when you give such advice, the reply is ‘We do it the way our grandfathers did.’”

Beer brewing technique was very similar to the way it is done today, with the exception of equipment. As a rule, beer was made locally because its production was cheaper than transportation.

Honey (kind of alcoholic liquor) was made from honey, berries, yeast and hop; it was in between beer and “plain wine” in terms of strength.

Apart from the drinks named, home-brewed beer was quite popular, especially in Siberian villages.

Liquor production and sale was strictly controlled by the state. This does not mean that all the distilleries belonged to the state but people involved in this business had to supply their products at fixed prices which were half or one-third of retail prices. The sale of vodka was completely in the hands of the state, which is not surprising as it was the most important source of income. This was especially true of Siberia, where the climate encouraged the inhabitants to consume liquor with passion.

Data on liquor sale in Siberian cities collected by Mueller are significant. For example, this is what he learned about New Mangasea (Turukhansk). “Wine” (that is vodka) was brought to Mangasea from Yeniseisk, where it cost 1ruble 20 kopecks per bucket, and was sold for 3 rubles 2 kopecks. The dynamics of vodka consumption was as follows: 934 buckets in 1737 and 1117 buckets in 1738, and note that the Mangasean *voevoda’s* (governor’s) chancellery complained to the scholar that there was not enough wine. It can be easily calculated that income from vodka sale was up to 2,000 rubles a year. To compare, personal taxes in the whole Mangasea *uyezd* (region) amounted to 934 rubles 30 kopecks. Customs duties, including duties imposed on furs in transit – 291 rubles 48 kopecks in 1738 – were also much lower than vodka income, to say nothing of other taxes and duties.

Liquor was sold retail at *kabaks* (taverns). One could find *kabaks* not only in cities and towns, but also in *ostrogs* (settlements), *slobodas* (big villages inhabited by peasants who were not serfs), *selas* (central villages) and sometimes even in small villages. For instance, the Verkhnetursky region had 15 *kabaks*: 3 in the town, 5 in *slobodas*, 3 in *pogosts* (inns), 2 in central villages, 1 at a copper factory and 1 in a small village. The *kabaks* were usually put up at busy highways and in custom-houses – that is in places where strong drinks were in high demand.

A typical Siberian *kabak* was an *izba* (peasant’s log hut), remote from the rest of the village, with a cellar where liquor was stored. The area of a *kabak* was about 30-40 square meters (sometimes larger); for example, in the Irbit’sk *sloboda* members of the academic detachment found two seasonal *kabaks*, open during trade fairs, with an area of 32.2 and 40.8 square meters and one *kabak* open throughout the year with an area of 72.6 square meters.

The state *kabaks* were run by *kabatsky golovas* (*kabaks’* heads), and the person who was selling wine at a *kabak* was called a *tselovalnik* (literally, a person who kisses something – *tselovalniks* kissed a cross when they accepted this position). These “important” people were elected from well-off citizens. *Kabaks’* working hours were limited only in the areas where factory workers lived so that mining and metallurgical plants could run smoothly.

It was against the rule to serve hot snacks – no wonder the merry-making often went out of control. *Kabaks* were not just for drinking – it was sort of a club where the customers could get together to communicate and to play cards. Playing cards was usually inseparable from drinking, and in the memoirs left by the members of the expedition “drink and play cards” (or “drink one’s belongings away and lose”) virtually became set phrases. By the way, state monopoly on selling cards was another important source of income: a deck of cards cost 50 kopecks on the average, which compares well to the personal tax imposed on peasants (70 kopecks per year).



Despite strict bans and severe punishments, illegal taverns, called *korchmas*, were very popular in Siberia in the second half of the 18th century. A *korchma* had a narrow trusted circle of customers who were attracted by lower vodka prices and by greater freedom of action: apart from playing cards, one could dice there; and in many *korchmas* you could enjoy, for a sum of money, the favors of women.

Retail prices of liquor differed significantly depending on the region. This difference was attributed to a number of circumstances like various costs of raw materials, production and delivery of alcoholic drinks; specific features of social stratification; and purchasing ability of the drinking population. Liquor lovers felt at ease in the Urals and West Siberia, which were grain-producing areas; whilst in East Siberia, for instance, their life was much harder. According to Mueller, "In 1714 'plain wine' was delivered to Yekaterinburg at 64 kopecks per bucket and was sold at *kabaks* at 2 rubles 12 kopecks; in Irkutsk, the purchase price was 1 ruble 60 kopecks and the sale price was 3 rubles 10 kopecks; in Yakutsk, wine from Irkutsk was sold for 4 rubles; in Okhotsk, for 15 rubles; and in Kamchatka it could be sold for up to 40 rubles."

We should bear in mind an important fact: in Russia, any barriers erected by the state have always existed for the people to find out how to get round them. The 18th century was not an exception – in the total amount of vodka consumed, a fair share was made and sold illegally by individuals.

Clandestine distilling brought handsome profits and was wide-spread in all Siberian *uyezds*. The following fact can help to form a true notion of the scale of illegal production. Steller, who reached Yakutsk in late May 1740, witnessed arrival to the town of the first trading vessels. He noted in his diary, "On Sunday, June 8, the weather was unusually warm and clear but for vodka traders from Irkutsk it was cold and cloudy, because Lieutenants Ostyakov and Lebedev, informed by workers, confiscated the vodka worth 2,000 rubles that had been secretly brought by river from Irkutsk." On the following day, the resident of Yakutsk Borisov enlightened the scholar about the reasons for

40,000 ruble arrears in vodka sale at the Yakutsk department. He said the *tselovalniks* were drunk so often that they could not organize properly the sale and stock-taking of state vodka.

Before 1740, vodka had been delivered to Yakutsk by contractors at an agreed price; however, along with the legal wine, the contractors sold three times as much illegal wine (which was of a better quality). Understandably, they built up a lively trade: if a bucket of legal "double" vodka cost 8 rubles, "underground" vodka was almost half the price at 4.5 rubles per bucket. Hence, it is not surprising that legal wine was often left unsold. Eventually, in 1740 Irkutsk contractors were not allowed to ship vodka to Yakutsk. Nevertheless, supplies of illegal vodka continued. Steller's informant named three popular channels: "1. Traders say they have been sent by the officers whom nobody dares to offend. 2. Traders drown barrels with vodka in lakes or dig them in the earth in the vicinity of Yakutsk, and on their arrival to Yakutsk send the Yakuts with a trusted person to get the barrels out of the earth or water on a light night. 3. Traders make rafts, load them with vodka barrels and put wood on top to dispel suspicion. When they have a chance, they take the barrels home or carry vodka home in buckets as if it were plain water from the river." The same informant told Steller that some members of the Second Kamchatka expedition were involved in illegal vodka supplies. They acted as follows: purchased legal vodka in Irkutsk; to reduce its volume, distilled it to make it as strong as possible; and then carried it along pretending it was "plain wine" for their personal needs. When they arrived in Yakutsk, Okhotsk or Kamchatka, where vodka was in great demand and its price skyrocketed, they diluted it with water and sold to the local population.

The situation described could hardly be regarded as normal. Local economy suffered and the population became corrupted. This was clear not only to the messengers of St. Petersburg Academy but to state officers as well. A proof is the project "On Bread and Wine" by an unknown author sent from the Senate to V. Bering and head of the Okhotka port G. G. Skorniakov-Pisarev in September 1733. The project said that in the last six years the entire

wine trade had been in the hands of private traders. "Plain wine" purchased at 4 rubles per bucket in Yakutsk was sold in Okhotsk at 15 rubles and in Kamchatka at 35-40 rubles, which "ruined state servants and factory workers because for them it was the cure against any illness and the only way to have fun".

Interestingly, state-run *kabaks* based in Yakutsk mostly sold illegal vodka supplied by licensed traders. This was possible because of the cover-up: vodka traders were largely "best citizens, aristocrats and state servants", who were in charge of the outposts set up to prevent such crimes.

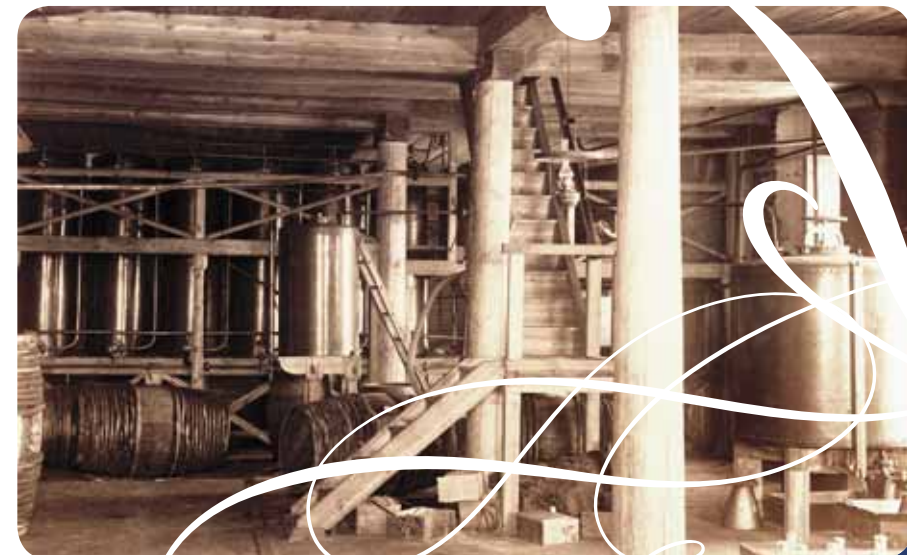
Increase in underground vodka production marked up bread prices: before vodka trading licenses were introduced, rye flour was sold in Yakutsk at 7-10 kopecks per *pood* (36

lb or 16.38 kilograms); after the introduction of licenses the price went up to 60 kopecks per *pood*. This was a natural consequence of the fact that a great part of grain grown in the upper reaches of the river Lena became to be used for the production of illegal vodka. In connection with this, the anonymous project suggested prohibiting private traders to buy and sell vodka and resuming a state monopoly over this business, the way it had been in the old days.

Mueller also thought that the existing practices caused grave damage to the state's economic interests, encouraged corruption and impoverished Siberia's inhabitants. In contrast to the remedy prescribed by the author of the project "On Bread and Wine", Mueller suggested granting the right to make vodka to anybody at all, in exchange for



Telma distillery. Purification department. From the album of factory industry of the Irkutsk gubernia, 1895/6, published by V. A. Belogoloviy





a fixed tax, which would inevitably mark down vodka prices. Steller agreed wholeheartedly with the professor: “As for the income generated by the sale of vodka, I think that the scheme devised by Prof. Mueller would bring more profit than selling it at high prices. When a bucket of vodka costs 20 rubles, private traders actually steal from the state by selling vodka secretly or – if they have an opportunity – openly, at stalls next to churches, and thus enrich themselves beyond measure and ruin the local population, inclined to drinking as it is. Every resident could be obliged to pay a tax in the form of a certain amount of fur and, in exchange, he could be granted the right to produce vodka. I believe this would weaken people’s inclination for drinking and bring considerable profit to the state, especially if the new regulations also

applied to the Itelmen who were willing to do it.” The scholar believed that lower prices would reduce vodka’s charm – in Steller’s opinion, its high price only made it more desirable and more prestigious.

Members of the expedition observed a growth of the alcoholic “infection” from the west to the north. In West Siberia, there were a lot of old-believers, which made things look better, to a certain extent. Gmelin was surprised to find out that “the old-believers completely abstained from vodka”. The town of Yeniseisk had another surprise in store for him: its inhabitants drank very little at Christmas.

In East Siberia, the travelers saw a very different picture. The frontier behind which the kingdom of vodka lay was Krasnoyarsk. Let us turn,

once again, to the notes made by caustic Gmelin. His remarks about the Krasnoyarsk Kazaks, whose “only trade is drinking”, are dripping with sarcasm. Together with the voevoda (governor), he watched *Maslenitsa*¹ merry-making in the village of Torguoshino near Krasnoyarsk – in particular, the assault of a snow fortress carried out by the Kazaks. They did not succeed, and Gmelin comments, “You can easily imagine how skilful these warriors are in the battlefield – any peasants who have never carried weapons would defeat them.” He also found surprising that the citizens drank themselves to death during the most honored state and religious holidays. He remarked ironically that people behaved as though they did their best to obey a royal decree prohibiting remaining sober on these days. Gmelin’s remarks agree well with Krashennikov’s observations of *Maslenitsa* in Krasnoyarsk: “During the holiday, people go to other people’s homes uninvited and are very fond of getting drunk: some of them go all round the town and have a glass of wine over here and a glass of beer over there, and become so intoxicated that feel no pain; but if they hear a noise coming from a house, they conclude that there is a drinking-bout there and crawl to this house to have another drink.”

Gmelin’s story about the citizens of Ilimsk is even more negative. His explanation of the abominable living conditions that struck him in the town was as follows: “People here do nothing but drink and sleep. Why should they need better houses? Some of them eat game, but their only job is



Tobolsk. 17th c. engraving.

to make traps for small animals or pits to catch big animals and to throw about sublimate to poison foxes – they are too lazy to go hunting. Others squeeze out of the Tungus everything they need to support life. Most of them are military servants but they virtually see no service... or do anything in the town but visit taverns.”

Mueller maintained that decline of many East Siberian towns was attributed to alcoholism. For instance, this is what he wrote about Nerchinsk, “Bread is very cheap but local wine is excessively expensive, which ruins a lot of people who cannot restrict themselves in drinking.”

Traveling along the Lena, the scholars were amazed by the excellent physical health of local peasants, their industry and good living conditions. However, their pathological inclination toward liquor leaped to the eye. “Peasants living on the Lena cannot complain that they have a bad life...Every woman has a silk dress, and men drink on any pretext.”

By the way, this evidence stands apart from a number of the similar ones. Why? As a rule, the scholars’ sad discussion of alcoholism concerned only one group of Russian inhabitants of Siberia, namely *sluzhiliye* (military servants). As for the alcoholic “exercises” of representatives of other social groups, they belong to the genre of an anecdote. This is a typical example of such an anecdote

related by Steller in his letter to Mueller sent from Irkutsk: “Heard a funny story told by the bishop about himself: being tipsy during *Maslenitsa*, he ordered to put the horses to a sledge and go to Selenginskiy across Lake Baikal but in the middle of the lake came to his senses, asked where he was and said to turn back: you shouldn’t have listened to me, blockheads, I was dreaming!”

Stories about military servants do not sound like anecdotes but, no matter how critical they are, they cannot be regarded as final characteristics of the entire social group. The travelers valued highly moral and professional qualities of Siberian *sluzhiliye*; it was from among this group that the scholars preferred to select people to perform the most responsible tasks. Mueller confessed that almost illiterate soldiers in charge of meteorological observations coped with this job better than any “half-educated” people. An amusing fact: one day one of such “meteorologists” told the professors that he could not measure air temperature because mercury in the thermometer was frozen. The reply was to the effect that he should drink less. However, he turned out to be right: at very low air temperatures mercury becomes solid. In this way, a regular Kazak made an important scientific discovery.

The military servants were not all alike – some of the features of this estate depended on geography. For example,

Noble Gentleman Adjunct Georg Wilhelm Steller,
Dear Sir,

In virtue of Her Majesty's decree sent from the Irkutsk Provincial Chancellery and on Your Honor's order, a raft shall be built in the village of Ustilgin that can hold up to a thousand pood (a pood is 36 lb. avoirdupois) with a view to floating it to Yakutsk. This raft should be handed over to bergauer Grigory Samoilov, who is under your command. <...> And the aforesaid bergauer (the correct word is "bertgauer", a worker engaged in mining ores or working deposits – A.E.) Samoilov together with his companions has lived in the village of Ustilgin for a long time, drinking in the tavern. <...> And after we came to Ustilgin, Aleksey Sofronov, who is under Your Honor's command, called us to this raft, where there were people under Your Honor's command and very drunk. <...> And these people under Your Honor's command gave a terrible beating to our batmen and abused us with many swear-words. Before Your Honor's arrival to Ustilgin, people under Your Honor's command had been quiet and not drunk; and after Your Honor's departure from Ustilgin, they brawled and gave offence, and the military servants from Irkutsk Egor Popov and his friends did the same. Apart from other offences committed, fifty people were beaten up.

From the letter by the shopman of the Ustilgin ostrog S. Zimin to G. W. Steller, dated April 28, 1740. Georg Wilhelm Steller. Letters and Documents. 1740. Moscow, 1998, p. 203

in West Siberia sluzhiliye usually set up house and took up cattle-breeding, crop-growing or trades; their way of life (including drinking habits) did not differ much from that of peasants and residents of trading quarters. The situation in north-eastern Siberia was very different – it is the Kazaks living in this region that earned many disparaging descriptions. The scholars mentioned such transgressions as disobeying the authorities (including rebellions), abuse of power, corruption, robbery and unrestrained alcoholism. The reasons behind such “freedom” of behavior were absence of control over the military servants located in remote ostrogs. Steller wrote that soldiers based in north-eastern Siberia were either adventure seekers or runaways from justice or exiled from Russia for some unseemly acts, for which these people were the right element.”

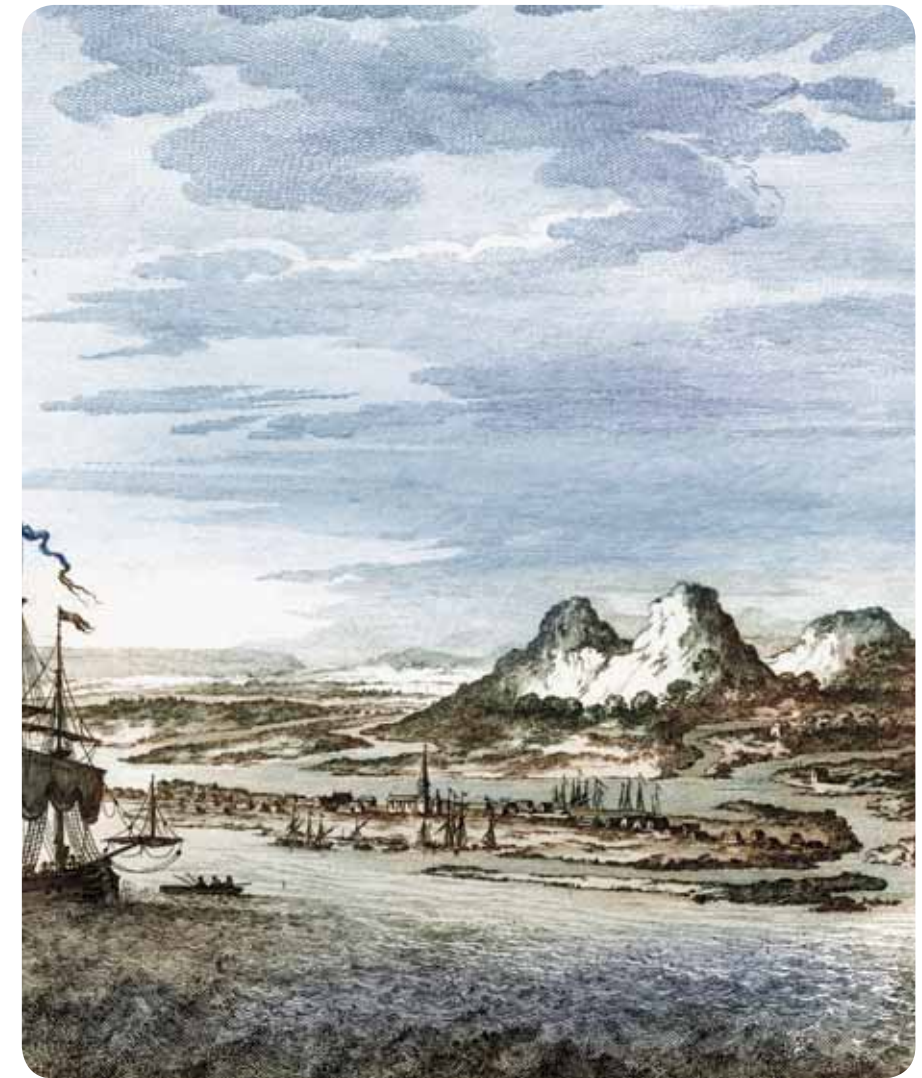
Contributing to morals corruption was the practice of exiling a sluzhiliy who committed a crime in West Siberia to the east, where he not only preserved his status but was promoted to a higher position. In this way, punishment turned into reward. This is what Steller wrote on the subject: “Moscow people get a very quick promotion here: one who leaves Moscow as a private, becomes a sergeant in Tobolsk, an ensign in Tomsk, and a colonel in Kamchatka; and no matter what harm he may do to the country and its population, he cannot be stopped.” Another source that confirms the situation described is statistics. It says that in certain periods additional staff of the sluzhiliye of the Yakutsk region consisted predominantly of the exiled, factory and idle people, among whom there were a lot of marginals and plain criminals.

In this environment, alcoholism flourished. Steller's reference of Yakutsk inhabitants is scathing: “The residents are cunning, untruthful, lazy; they are crooks and drunkards; and neither men nor women care that a bucket of vodka costs them 8 rubles.” In unison with this quotation is Bering's report to the Senate made at the time of the First Kamchatka expedition (1725–1728): “There is about a thousand of sluzhiliye in Yakutsk. Even though they have commanders on top of them, they have no fear and drink so much that gamble away not only their belongings, but also their wives and children. When they have to go somewhere on duty, they have no dress and their guns are faulty.” Krasheninnikov commented that even though in Kamchatka making vodka privately was prohibited, people

rarely come to a kabak sober, “and they go to kabaks in order to drink within measure, and their measure is when they are under the table.”

In those places, drunken orgies did not have a long history. Before they opened the sea route to Kamchatka through the Sea of Okhotsk, the military men had to fight their way there through the lands inhabited by the militant Koryaks – it goes without saying that there was no question of transporting vodka; although, according to Krasheninnikov, “it was a torture for them that they could not get wine”.

The quick-witted Kazaks did find a way out after all. Like the Itelmen, they – actually their servants, to be more exact – laid in a lot of berries for winter. In spring, the berries that had not been used began to ferment and had been thrown away until it was discovered that the fermented berry juice could make you drunk. Soon the Kazaks learned how to distil vodka from the fermented berries. When berries were scarce, they fermented the so-called “sweet grass” together with kernels of cedar nuts – the drink obtained could make you tipsy. A true revolution in the use of sweet grass was made in the early 1710s by the Bolshereetsk slyzhilye Danilo Cherny and Aleksey Malakhov who “could bear anything but lack of wine” (Krasheninnikov). Having conducted a series of experiments, they succeeded in developing the most rational way of distilling wine from “sweet grass” soaked in water: they could have one bucket of vodka from 2.5 poods of grass. If distillation of the vodka was repeated, the drink produced was hard enough



A view of the town of Okhotsk in the 19th c. Drawing from the book “Peoples of Russia: Album of Paintings” (St. Petersburg, 1880)

“to etch iron”, in Krasheninnikov's words. In this way, the last obstacle to the development of Kamchatka was removed, remarked ironical Mueller. Since vodka production from “sweet grass” became extremely wide-spread, prices of the raw material skyrocketed up to 10 rubles for pood. To compare, the annual salary of Kamchatka Kazaks was 5 rubles. Naturally, high prices lead to robberies – the Itelmen

had the tradition of picking up “sweet grass”, too. “As soon as there is enough snow to travel by sledge, this is the first product brought from the ostrog”, wrote Steller. “Since the Itelmen often get offended and even beaten by the inebriated Kazaks, I usually call this plant sour cabbage instead of sweet grass.”

The “scientific” discovery of Kamchatka Kazaks interested the



At a tavern. Engraving from the book J. Chappe d'Auteroche "Voyage en Sibirie" (V.1, Paris, 1768)

scholars. Mueller and Gmelin, when they were sending off Krasheninnikov to Kamchatka, procured him with a detailed instruction of 89 points, the longest of which described "sweet grass" and ways to make wine from it. The student was proposed "to conduct a test and determine how strong the distilled wine was". As a result, Krasheninnikov's work "On stocking up sweet grass and making wine from it" appeared.

The state did not ignore the Kazaks' innovation either. Petersburg planned to launch a mass production of state wine from "sweet grass" at Kamchatka, to the design prepared by V. Bering on his return from the First Kamchatka expedition. Just before the Second Kamchatka expedition, Bering was handed in the Senate's decree instructing "to make wine from the local sweet grass and to sell it at moderate prices, and also to supervise that the local population should not get drunk to death".

Steller copied Krasheninnikov's experiments. Assessing the quality of vodka made from "sweet grass", this great connoisseur of spirits wrote: "This vodka has the following features: it is very tender; it contains a lot of acid and is, hence, harmful for health; it thickens blood and affects

it strongly, making it black; it could be used to etch and engrave iron. People drinking this vodka become drunk very quickly; and, when in this state, they become wild and violent; their faces get blue in color. If somebody drinks a couple of cups, he is tortured by strange and weird dreams and nightmares all through the night; and on the day that follows becomes so shy, sad and worried as though he has committed a most outrageous crime. This state drives aboriginals to have another drink, and it may happen — I saw it with my own eyes — that on the next day they get so drunk from a glass of cold water that their legs do not hold them."

Here are Steller's explanations of the technique of making vodka: "They make vodka in the following way. 2 poods of sweet grass is covered with 4 buckets of warm or warmish water; to start fermentation, they add to the mixture remains of the previous distillation (which gives the drink an unpleasant taste or smell) or honeysuckle berries, which make the infusion harder, nicer and increase the yield of vodka from it; or they can ferment the mixture with oxidized flour. In 24 hours, the mixture is distilled to produce a bucket of vodka." The scholar also made

the following amusing observations: "Remains of the distillation are the tastiest food for cows; this is why these animals roam the streets of the ostrog, paying a visit to the places where vodka is distilled and staying there for a while. Very often, the cattle act as guards to their masters, seeing them to the kabaks, which often made me laugh."

Enthusiasm aroused by the invention of Kamchatka Kazaks was boundless and encouraged further "investigations". Somebody even tried to use fish that has turned sour as the raw material to make vodka. Steller commented, "Stories told about drinks and vodka made from fish are nothing but a pack of lies. In fact, some people did attempt distilling vodka from rotten fish but the only result was some unpalatable and fetid liquid."

Let us try to sum up what has been said. No doubt, descriptions of the alcoholic ways members of the academic detachment of the Second Kamchatka expedition observed in Siberia are at times depressing. Reading them, you understand that a lot of modern phenomena such as "drunken" budget, shadow economy and corruption were not born yesterday; they date back to our remote past. The attitude of modern researchers towards the evidence left by the scholarly travelers of the 18th century is not equal. Their critical style is sometimes attributed to national haughtiness: "What can you expect from the Germans writing about Russians?" I do not believe this is true. First, resorting to "nationality" arguments is not fruitful in research; second, the most vivid stories concerning Siberian alcoholism belong to the Russian scholar S. P. Krasheninnikov.

Getting acquainted with the sad sketches made by the members of the expedition, we should try to get the message left by their authors. Most important about these stories

is not the negative things related but search for a remedy to improve the situation. The scholars not only described alcoholism but they were looking for ways to overcome it. Their advice has not lost its value yet, we only have to see the useful part of it. Actually, it is not "pure" science we deal with — though it can never be entirely "pure".

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We have used illustrations from the book by I. R. Takal *Russia's Merry-Making: the History of the Alcoholic Problem in Russia* (Neva Magazine Publishers, St. Petersburg, 2002)