Alcoholism in Communist Poland:
How Regime and Alcohol Interact

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ABSTRACT: In communist Poland, while the state took care of the basic needs of its people, there was a widespread social issue plaguing society: alcoholism. Alcoholism was an increasing issue from the period of destalinization, to the Solidarity movement and over time, sobriety became a symbol of resistance under a regime that relied on the vodka industry as the most important source of domestic revenue. By analyzing the high levels of consumption, the consequences, and the response from the state, church, and union, I analyze the political nature of alcoholism in Poland. To highlight the role ideology played, I also compare the social responses and methods of treatment in state socialism, to those in Western democratic countries. From this, an image begins to emerge of how alcoholism interacted with the regime and feelings of mass disenchantment. While it is yet to be seen if communist regimes directly impacted people's drinking habits, the Polish communist government certainly allowed the health and wellness of its citizens to come second. Further research into the dynamics of alcoholism in other Eastern European communist countries such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia could further develop an understanding of this complicated relationship between alcohol and communism. This topic of study remains important as the intergenerational dynamics for the families who lived under this system remain; looking at alcoholism under this regime can help us understand these ongoing social relations.

KEYWORDS: Addiction, alcoholism, communism, Eastern Europe, Poland, solidarity, sobriety

The treatment of those who are the worst off in a society can tell us a great deal about the society itself. While state-socialist countries in Eastern Europe did not experience social issues like unemployment or homelessness, there was a social problem lurking beneath the surface that was impacting the masses in a very real way: alcoholism. For the most part, the state took care of the basic needs of people through expansive social services, yet heavy drinking was an increasingly large issue. It was different from the kind of addiction we see in capitalist countries, where those who are afflicted tend to be those who have fallen through the cracks in society. Was alcoholism in these state-socialist countries a remnant of the capitalist era, or was it a sign of mass disenchantment with state socialism itself? The communist regime stood idly by for decades as the problem of alcoholism grew worse, and this contributed to the politicization of the problem. By looking at the dominance of heavy drinking in Poland during this period and the responses of the Polish communist government and other social institutions, we can see the political nature of the issue. To highlight the role ideology played, I will also compare the social responses and methods of treatment in state socialism to those in Western democratic countries.

Consumption and Consequences

It is difficult to get a clear understanding of the scope of alcohol abuse in Eastern European state socialism because statistics only account for legal consumption ("The Problem of Alcoholism in Poland" 1972). In Poland, these statistics do not include the "large amounts of alcohol systematically stolen from their factories" nor do they include "illicitly distilled moonshine, which [was] produced on a larger scale, especially in rural districts" ("The Problem of Alcoholism in Poland" 1972, 7). In 1950, 4.2 litres of pure alcohol were legally consumed per capita, by those aged 15 and older, and that number rose fairly steadily, peaking at 11.1 litres in 1980 (Gorsky et al. 2010, 2061). While these numbers reflect typical consumption for Europe, the way Poles consumed alcohol was heavy drinking in one sitting — as opposed to the French tradition of drinking wine daily at dinner ("The Problem of Alcoholism in Poland" 1972, 7). Culturally, Poland is part of a Northern European drinking tradition that involves the consumption of primarily hard spirits and is characterized by "irregular binge drinking episodes (e.g., during weekends and at festivities), and the acceptance of drunkenness in public" (Popova et al. 2007, 466).

The legal consumption statistics clearly do not tell the whole story, but nevertheless, they demonstrate that consumption was on the rise throughout the communist rule. There were efforts to reduce alcohol consumption even during the early communist years, but they were to little avail. By the early 1980s, a lot had changed — the Solidarity movement was in full swing — but the growing problem of alcoholism remained. In midst of political turmoil, all of Poland's major political forces were conducting campaigns in an attempt to tackle the issue; the Roman Catholic Church, the communist government, and the Solidarity trade union each knew that alcoholism had become a major social problem for Poland (Smith 1982; Kaufman 1984).

The problem of alcoholism was evident in many aspects of life — from the bar, to the workplace, to crime. While going to work drunk was against the law, this was not strictly enforced. In order to meet quotas and stay on schedule, managers could not afford to dismiss people, and oftentimes "the foreman himself [drank] with the worker" (as cited in "The Problem of Alcoholism in Poland" 1972, 21). There was a tradition of drinking at work that left "hundreds of empty bottles" to be carried away by night watchmen for a refund (21). Despite being so widespread, workplace drinking was a concern; between 11 and 18% of workplace accidents in 1969 were due to drinking according to the Chief Inspectorate for the Protection of Labor of the Central Council of the Trade Unions (22). Additionally, it was estimated that the same year that 20 million workdays were lost due to absenteeism as a result of excessive drinking (22). Data from a 1978 study from the Ministry of Labor Wages and Social Affairs reported that one in 39 employees was working drunk and one in 26 public transit workers was driving their vehicle drunk ("Situation Report" 1978, 6; Chase 1985, 423).

Chase (1985) found that in the southeastern rural area of Poland the state-owned restauracja was a popular drinking spot not only for factory workers, but also for truck drivers passing through. These drivers "drank in spite of severe penalties in the

form of cash payments (500 zlotys) and immediate loss of license" (417). Many Poles were caught driving under the influence and "many of them were drivers of trucks and of public transport buses" (as cited in "The Problem of Alcoholism in Poland" 1972, 34). As opposed to looking at statistics on consumption alone, these examples are perhaps more useful for understanding how widespread the problem of alcoholism was. The problem was real for the people who lived in Poland at this time, and while many wanted drastic action to address the issue, that action never seemed to come.

The Social and Cultural Conditions of Alcohol Abuse

Kerr (1978) highlights that alcohol abuse often starts with drinking to "counter depressions" or to cope with fear and "existentialist Angst" — meaning that one's environment does play a role (182). Working conditions for many in communist Poland were not conducive to sobriety. When faced with a bleak or uncertain future, one is more compelled to drink. Henryk Korotynski suggested that people had little incentive to get clean because of these social conditions:

> why should one make an effort, since it is well known that honest work does not pay, that managerial positions are staffed with yes men who have "connections" with the higher authorities, since personal and organizational talent only counts if you have a party membership (as cited in "The Problem of Alcoholism in Poland" 1972, 2-3).

People perceived alcoholism as being directly related to their social circumstances and their disenchantment with the system they were living in. Of course, the idea that there could be alienation in a workers' state and that it contributed to drinking habits was fiercely opposed by Eastern European regimes; but in private, affected individuals were more likely to say differently (3).

Cultural drinking practices interacted with the way people felt about their own social situation in the communist regime. In Chase's (1985) ethnographic study, he got first-hand accounts of the culture of drinking in rural Poland, during this time, which highlights the nature of how and why Poles got drunk. A great deal of the discussed dynamics surrounding alcohol can be exemplified through the story of a trip to the bar:

> Working class men are generally served in a large room of the hotel which they call the chaupa. It is usually enveloped in a screen of smoke, which incidentally, makes it somewhat easier to mask the quick replenishing of one's kieliszek with illicit, home brew or cheaper store-purchased alcohol hidden under the table. Fines in the amount of 5,000 zlotys could be extracted for such an offence; the guilty were rarely reported for in a system where favours are rendered for favours, waitresses were bribed to keep silent (418).

Chase explains that in this town, waitresses and innkeepers were motivated to sell as much alcohol as possible through receiving commissions, that stores often had a greater stock of alcohol than food, and that illegal homemade alcohol was widespread (417-23). Culturally, there was a belief that some degree of alcohol was healthy, but people also recognized alcohol was serving as an escape — particularly for young men who worked in the local factories or mines. For many, drinking was thought to serve as "a cushion not only against the hazards of bitter winter weather but also as a palliative for political and economic oppression" (421). Poles were somewhat culturally sympathetic to drinking and also lived in a system where alcohol was always readily available, even encouraged, and this contributed to a culture of drinking as an escape.

Alcoholism as an Industry and State Responses

At the centre of the Polish alcoholism problem was a glaring irony: the state's most important source of domestic revenue was vodka (Kaufman 1984). Vodka was a huge industry in Poland that employed 40,000 people and accounted for 10% of state revenue in the 1970s (Smith 1982, 99). The state not only had a monopoly over alcohol production but also controlled the anti-drinking lobby (Gorsky et al. 2010, 2060). As a result, the health of the population was not a strong consideration in alcohol policy. Commercial interests and the reliance on alcohol for economic stability were what

guided the decision-making of the state. Gorsky et al. (2010) point out that this situation "embodied a fundamental contradiction" in that for the regime, "[e]xcessive drinking must be curbed because it transgressed the ideals of socialist citizenship, yet the production and consumption of alcohol must be encouraged because it was fundamental to the socialist economy" (2067). Little alcohol was imported or exported. Since most of the alcohol produced in Poland was also consumed there, production and consumption were in a direct relationship (Smith 1982, 99). The state was a mass enabler for the addiction of citizens and also responsible for addressing and treating addiction (Smith 1982). The result was that for most of the years leading up to the Solidarity movement, little action was taken.

Before Solidarity, the state was aware of the problem of alcoholism and did take modest action to combat it (Gorsky et al. 2010; Smith 1982). A 1959 anti-alcoholic bill gave the people's councils the responsibility of managing the funds allocated to addressing alcoholism, which was raised through surcharges on bottles ("The Problem of Alcoholism in Poland" 1972, 12). However, the bill only required 10% of the funds to be used on fighting alcoholism and the councils failed to meet that number, coming in at closer to 7% (13). It was often quite mysterious where the remaining funds ended up, and with little accountability, there was paradoxically even a case of the funds being used to build a new bar (Kerr 1978, 191; "The Problem of Alcoholism in Poland" 1972, 11).

There were 9 respective increases in the price of alcohol in the 25 years between 1950 and 1975, "each time leading to a temporary moderation in the increase in consumption" (Smith 1982, 99). According to the June 1978 Polish "Situation Report" from Radio Free Europe, in 1974, the cost of alcohol increased by an average of 25% and again by that number in 1978 (3). The "Situation Report" from later that year in October, said that it was "common knowledge" that the price increases had no effect, and that consumption was still rising (1978, 7). An "action program" was created that same year by the Sejm deputies as reported by a lawyer's journal but there was little attention paid to it, as even the existing regulations were not enforced (7). The October "Situation Report" noted, "as things now

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stand, virtually nobody is legally responsible for putting existing regulations into actual practice". The action taken by the state consisted of empty words, stolen funds, and plans that everyone knew would never come to fruition.

The communist government in Poland consistently used propaganda posters to spread an anti-alcohol message to the people, while simultaneously failing to take meaningful action (Gorsky et al. 2010). Anti-alcohol posters changed in style as time went by (2061). They fit the socialist realism style during the Stalinist years, then took on more macabre styles that rejected realism during de-Stalinization (2061). Regardless of style, however, a common theme in the posters was labelling alcoholics as social deviants and not as people in need of medical intervention. "Government anti-alcohol strategies were geared to containing disorder" and the discourse in these posters served the state in that they "legitimized a policy with little capacity for medical or self-help responses" (2064). Posters showed alcoholics as freeloaders who were not contributing to society, as deviants who were eroding traditional institutions, or as a deadly risk to society. One poster from 1952 depicts a drunk man lying on the street as his comrades yell at him "Stop Drinking! Come With Us and Build a Better Tomorrow" (2064). Another from 1984 has no words, only a noose in the shape of a bottle against a black background (2066).

Despite these government messages, alcohol was always readily available; while the "economy consistently failed to meet the appetite for consumer goods, drinking remained comparatively cheap and easily available" (2064). It was the only commodity which was easily accessible to everyone in society and few alternative quality goods — like coffee, tea, candy, and cultural items — could be purchased as inexpensively as a bottle of vodka ("The Problem of Alcoholism in Poland" 1972, 30). In the years before Solidarity, production was never reduced, and cost remained relatively low (Chase 1985; Smith 1982). While the communist government appeared concerned with the issue through the anti-alcohol campaign, there was no meaningful action taken that would disrupt economic interests.

Alternative Responses: Church and Trade Union

This contradiction was no secret, and once the Solidarity movement permitted a greater degree of liberalization, people were emboldened to point it out, as "[p]eople who hadn't been allowed to speak their minds for thirty-five years had suddenly come unstopped" (as cited in Zimny 2000, 30). Solidarity encouraged Poles to be "Sober, Prudent and Strong" and was unafraid to point out this state hypocrisy (Kaufman 1984). Starting in the Lenin shipyards in Gdansk in 1980, Solidarity had a policy of prohibition where the selling of alcohol was banned (Smith 1982, 98). This policy was extended to other strikes that were emerging across the country, and campaigning against alcoholism was a recurring theme for the movement as a whole (Kaufman 1984; Smith 1982).

On the surface, this anti-alcohol sentiment was about the nation's health, but it was also a boycott of state vodka, recognizing the covert political nature of alcohol in Poland. Solidarity openly stated what many believed to be true about the state, vodka, and the growing problem of alcoholism. This is exemplified by the following Solidarity commission appeal:

> The totalitarian Government aims at a complete subjugation of all people… Promotion of alcoholism is a very effective method whereby this aim can be attained. We have to counter it…We can continue fighting only if we are sober, prudent and strong (Kaufman 1984).

Smith (1982) argues that the common belief within the movement that alcohol was used to suppress the people was justified with three pieces of evidence: despite shortages of most other consumer goods alcohol was always available in the country; Poland's alcohol problems were censored up until 1976; and, lastly, the government enabled the operation of many more retail outlets than legally allowed (100). People knew that vodka was an important industry for the government and that in addition to economic benefits, the nation's alcohol problem had political benefits for the state as well.

The church has always played a strong role in Poland as the nation is overwhelmingly Catholic — in spite of the rise and fall of communism. During the communist years, church officials consistently expressed concern about growing alcohol abuse;

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but, they were limited in that they were "denied the right to any form of organized social work" ("Situation Report" 1978, 7). However, this period also saw the relationship between church and state grow more friendly; the church was consulted on "ethical and spiritual matters" and was given permission to establish "anti-alcoholic circles" (7). Eventually, however, the church sided with Solidarity in the 1980s and sponsored the boycott of vodka in 1984 after the imposition of martial law (Kaufman 1984). A letter from Bishop Jan Mazur of Siedlce — the head of one of the antiliquor committees — called alcoholism a threat both in moral and biological terms (Kaufman 1984). During this time, the church took a political stance against the oppressive regime and did not look back, as demonstrated by another passage of this letter: "[n]o Christian and no Pole should drink alcohol this month, buy it or serve it. And let every drunk in this month be a reminder of the yoke of occupation and a symbol of those who oppressed, persecuted and exploited us at any given time" (Kaufman 1984). In Poland specifically, the role of the church cannot be underestimated: while it lacked power in the political sense, it held significant sway over the population and its position on alcohol and the Solidarity movement was highly influential.

The government responded to this developing narrative in Solidarity with a more radical alcohol policy of its own. In 1981, under General Jaruzelski, alcohol outlets were reduced from roughly 50, 000 to 30, 000, production was lowered by 20-30%, and prices went up by 50% for vodka in March of that year (Smith 1982, 100). However, Smith points out that the state was already struggling with production due to conflict with potato farmers. Additionally, in a state with many alcohol-dependent people, alcohol was highly sought after — no matter the price. Everyone panic-bought, and alcohol was soon rationed: half a litre of vodka monthly (100).

Smith notes that while there are no official statistics, doctors during this time told him that poison units were busy dealing "with alcoholics who had been drinking antifreeze or whatever came to hand" (100). The state taking drastic action had real implications. Many were addicted to alcohol and having their habit severely restricted for the first time, without any supports, was untenable. In light of the accusations of Solidarity, the state's legitimacy was questioned and there was a need for a firm approach (100). Alcoholism served as a symbol of societal decay that peaked during this time in what was a "struggle for moral superiority between trade union and state" (Gorsky et al. 2010, 2061). In December of 1981 Martial law was imposed in Poland and "[w]ithin 24 hours of taking over Poland…the Military Council of National Salvation imposed a ban on the sale of alcohol" (Smith 1982, 98). The Solidarity trade union was forced underground where it would operate until the collapse of the regime (Zimny 2000).

Addiction Narratives and Treatment Across East and West

Looking at differences in treatment between the Eastern bloc countries and the West can be helpful in identifying how ideology underpinned the way people thought about addiction. Rouse and Unnithan (1993) argue that in the United States, alcoholics are defined against a Protestant work ethic, and in the Soviet Union, against a proletarian ethic; but in both systems "alcoholics are defined as unproductive in the political-economic system" (213). Being an alcoholic under a communist regime, one is cast as a social deviant whose behaviour is not compatible with the "socialist way of life" (219). Under capitalism, the alcoholic "fails to answer the moral calling of work and 'honest effort'" (220).

The way that alcoholics were treated in these respective systems, also diverged. Under communism, a more medical, dehumanized approach was taken that focused on behaviour (217). The Soviets treated alcoholics with state-paid doctors and "aversion therapy along with the drug disulfiram (Antabuse) and mild shock treatments were common" (218). In the United States, treatment for alcoholics has been primarily performed through social work and by psychologists (219). Under this model, a more moralistic approach is taken where alcoholism is seen more as a personal moral failing that one must overcome. Moralistic and medical approaches were taken in both systems but, generally speaking, this was a point of distinction. The prevalence of alcoholism was far higher in the Soviet Union than it was in Poland and there is no available English literature on aversion therapy being used in Poland (Popova et al. 2007). Nevertheless, this comparison between the United States and the Soviet Union says something about how addiction is thought of in

different ways under capitalism and communism — but addicts are thought of in broadly similar ways. Poland had its own obstacles to treatment as there was a severe shortage of beds in treatment centres and an insufficient number of centres in general ("The Problem of Alcoholism in Poland" 1972, 26). According to the Department of Preventative Medicine and Treatment in habit-breaking centres, there were "only 1,500 beds available for the 5,000 people in need of mandatory treatment" (as cited in "The Problem of Alcoholism in Poland" 1972, 26). A problem associated with this shortage was the period of treatment being shortened (27). Doctors were also insufficiently trained on how to treat alcoholics, and there was a need for more social service workers to address the social conditions of drinking (27).

There was a large demand for treatment options and Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) emerged in Poland to fill that gap. A.A. turned up in Poland in Pozan in the 1950-60s and in Warsaw in the 1980s. Rouse and Unnithan (1993) suggest that the American addiction treatment system was not incompatible or overly foreign. A.A. works rather well under both capitalism and communism; while it is rooted in Protestantism and relies on appeals to a higher power, this could instead be the "principles of socialism" as A.A. actually uses camaraderie and collective, mutual forms of help (221). Nevertheless, the communist government did not see it this way and censored the Polish translation of the 12-step program from being published in a magazine in 1957 (Jannasz 2018, 9). For the state, A.A. was "an idea imported from America, which the Communist authorities believed was hard to control" (9). A.A. eventually did, however, begin rapid expansion in the 1980s as "[e]veryone was looking for an effective way to get rid of the habit" (7). It was no coincidence that the major turning points in Polish A.A. history in 1957 and 1980 corresponded with general Polish history: the 1956 thaw and the 1980 visit of John Paul II and the beginnings of Solidarity (10). People saw these historical political disturbances and the repeated failure of the government to address the problem of alcoholism and were emboldened to take the matter into their own hands.

Conclusion

In Poland during the formative years of communism, alcoholism steadily rose while little was done to adequately address it. In this case, the communist government certainly was complacent and allowed the health of its own people to come second. Furthermore, the government profited from enabling this mass addiction. By creating an economy reliant on vodka production for domestic consumption, the Polish government was able to generate significant revenue while benefiting from huge portions of the population being pacified and disengaged through alcohol. The state policies for treatment and prevention were also ineffective and insufficient. Taken together, these factors leave the communist regime in Poland as not only a bystander of the problem, but a perpetrator and part of the problem itself.

The way communist regimes impacted people's drinking habits, however, remains to be fully seen. Promising research is being done: a study from Malisauskaite and Klein (2018), for example, found a statistically significant connection between exposure to communism and binge drinking for men. Potential topics for further study could shed light on this such as examining if alcoholism shifted with the change of regime and how democratization influenced Poland's alcohol problem. Additionally, further comparative analysis of other Eastern European countries would be of value as many of them such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia also had very high rates of alcohol consumption (Popova et al. 2007). While the events of this story happened over 50 years ago, they are still relevant today. Communism created intergenerational dynamics for the families and societies that remain; by studying alcoholism during the period, we can better understand these ongoing social relations.

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