

## Vodka vs. fortified wine in Russia: retrospective view

Alcohol consumption and alcoholism in Russia are broadly discussed in professional literature, while it is often taken for granted that vodka has been a predominant form of consumed alcohol. In fact, fortified wines with alcohol concentration around 17-19 % by volume were massively produced and sold till 1986-87. There are no reliable statistics but it is obvious for an inside observer that, especially in the period between the two anti-alcohol campaigns (1972-1985), the part taken by the fortified wines was considerable, being larger than that of vodka at least in some parts of the country. This proportion was preserved also during the anti-alcohol campaign (1985-88), when vodka price doubled, but relatively cheap wines were still available, acknowledging that their quality worsened and there were long queues at bottle stores.



Fig. 1. Portwein 72 was cheap fortified wine of acceptable quality during the Soviet time. It has disappeared; and the popular label is used for selling of surrogates. Portwein 777 appeared later in the 1980s and has been poor quality from the beginning.

In 1972, the sales of vodka and other spirits on Sundays and between 7 p.m. and 11 a.m. on all other days were prohibited. However, wines were sold after 7 p.m. till the closing of shops at 8-10 p.m. and on Sundays. Some fortified wines were poor quality, resulting in more severe intoxications and hangovers than vodka. The poor quality of the added distilled alcohol was masked by the taste of wine and/or, increasingly since 1985, by artificial aromas. Workers finished their work at around 5 p.m.; considering queues at bottle stores, they could start with vodka but continued with fortified wine or consumed the latter only. Fortified wines were broadly used for heavy binge drinking; they were often better tolerated than vodka, which at doses over 300-400 ml sometimes provoked vomiting if consumed in a hurry, without meal (*zakuska*) and/or without accompanied drink such as beer or Pepsi. It was known by the drinking public that it was not advisable to consume fortified wine after vodka: it often resulted in more severe intoxications, vomiting, detentions by the police,

sleeping down in public places etc. All that was a foreseeable consequence of the anti-alcohol measures of 1972. Why the widespread consumption of fortified wines in the former Soviet Union has been disguised in some literature? Apparently, for two reasons. First, some of the cheap fortified wines or wine surrogates were more toxic than vodka.



Fig. 2. Beverage named Port (Portwein) sold in Moscow tasted like flavored tea with addition of poor-quality alcohol.

We observed marked mental confusion after consumption of poor quality fortified wines. It is obviously easier to add poor-quality alcohol to those red or brownish fluids with different tastes and flavors than to the rather standard product such as vodka. However, somewhat more expensive fortified wines were natural products of acceptable quality: they were produced from grapes or fruit by fermentation with addition of distilled alcohol. Manufacturing according to the standards turned out to be too expensive after the transition to the market economy in the 1990s. Well-known sorts of fortified wine disappeared around 1990; some of their names and labels have continued to be used for selling of surrogates containing poor quality alcohol, sugar, dyestuff and aromas (Figures). After the abolition of the state alcohol monopoly in 1992, the country was flooded by counterfeit and imported alcohol of poor quality. Sales of toxic beverages through legally operating shops and kiosks occurred generally with knowledge and sometimes with participation of authorities or their members. Exaggeration in some publications of consumption of non-beverage alcohol (industrial spirits, perfumery, moonshine) shifts responsibility for numerous poisonings from authorities onto the consumers. In fact, drinking of alcohol-containing technical fluids and perfumery decreased abruptly after the failure of the anti-alcohol campaign in 1989. Admittedly, a tendency of quality

improvement of alcoholic beverages sold in Russia has been noticed since approximately the last decade.

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## **Publication**

[Vodka vs. Fortified Wine in Russia: Retrospective View.](#)

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*Alcohol Alcohol. 2015 Sep*