

the plays of his life. He is unstintingly generous in crediting others and self-effacing to the point that you could believe it all happened by itself.

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Stephen Bittner: *Whites and Reds: A History of Wine in the Lands of Tsar and Commissar*

Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 2021, 272 pp., ISBN 978-0198784821, \$97.00.

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At one time, the Soviet Union was the fourth-largest wine producer in the world, but by the 1990s, production in the successor republics had dwindled. In this trajectory, there are some parallels with Algeria. But the crucial difference was that while Algerian wines were always oriented to the French market, Russian/Soviet wines were largely based on French varietals but were geared almost entirely to an undiscerning domestic market. As Stephen Bittner demonstrates in this new book, this reality proved to be the Achilles heel for those who aspired to build an industry premised on quality and some conception of terroir.

There has long been a need for a book (or article) that would properly address the history of Russian/Soviet wine and describe it in an international context. This study more than delivers. In an understated way, Bittner deftly guides the reader through a

number of thematic issues while paying close attention to changing dynamics over time. The book devotes considerable space to viticulture and oenology, including a fascinating account of the Russian response to phylloxera. It also addresses the changing face of production, distribution, and consumption in the decades after the Revolution.

Unsurprisingly, much of the text is concerned with moments of upheaval, most notably with regard to the Revolution and civil war, the catastrophic effects of two world wars, and the uncertainties unleashed by Stalin's purges in the 1930s and 1940s. Examples are drawn from across Russia/the Soviet Union, but the greater part of the text is concerned with Bessarabia (mostly what is now Moldova), Georgia, and especially Crimea, which was where the best wine was reputedly produced. The thread that holds much of the account together concerns the efforts of researchers and winemakers in two Crimean institutions, the Magarach Institute (founded in 1828) and the Massandra Wine Complex (a former crown estate) to keep the industry moving forward.

The book begins by observing a tension between the tendency at the Russian court (from the time of Peter the Great) to treat wine consumption as a marker of civilization and French wine as the epitome of refinement, on the one hand, and the recognition that the colonized territories of the Black Sea and the Caucasus were the cradle of winemaking. The wines produced by peasants in Georgia or Tatars in Crimea were typically regarded with condescension, while conscious efforts were made to settle Germans, Swiss, Bulgarians, and Greeks in the lands that were of less interest to the tsar and wine-loving aristocrats. In Crimea, French cultivars were planted extensively on the great estates, and the expertise of French and Italians was actively solicited. Indeed, the degree of extraversion of the Russian wine industry in the nineteenth century is quite remarkable. Before the revolution, "Russian wine" was overwhelmingly produced in the non-Russian territories and was heavily influenced by European models, personnel, and knowledge. This, Bittner reveals, had significant consequences.

The end of the monarchy and the eventual triumph of the Bolsheviks brought the former estates and research facilities under state control, but Bittner points to some surprising continuities. Notably, many of those who had received French education or training often remained in place, because their expertise was needed to rebuild the industry. And under the New Economic Policy, state controls that dated to tsarist times were replaced by a somewhat less dirigiste system of distribution.

With the accession to power of Stalin, however, many of those who survived the revolutionary years were removed. Following WWII, when the Soviet Union recaptured territories that had been under German control, many more were sent to penal camps—often never to be seen again. Given the pride that Stalin displayed in the products of his native Georgia, it would seem that the ax did not fall quite as heavily there. But being too wedded to particular ways of doing things still came at a risk. Bittner notes, for example, that the carrying out of public tastings to showcase the best wines came to be construed as evidence of misuse of state resources.

With the death of Stalin and the re-opening to the world, Bittner shows how Soviet wines began to re-appear in international competitions, albeit mostly in the Eastern Bloc. He also reveals the renewed interest in learning and updating wine technology

derived from western Europe. This proceeded alongside a turn to the United States. There is a fascinating account of the visits of Maynard Amerine of the University of California, Davis to the Soviet Union in 1962, 1971, and 1973—on the last occasion (rather bizarrely) with a view to helping the Pepsi Cola Company select some wines for the American market.

The book's final chapter addresses the reasons why the attempt to improve quality from the 1960s onwards proved to be a losing battle. Not surprisingly, Bittner identifies some of the problems with the country's productionist mindset, which meant that lower yields in the interest of higher quality caused administrative resistance, while the production of wine on an industrial scale, most notably in the vast Inter-Republic Wine Factory in Moscow, made it impossible to pay attention to the subtleties of terroir. But ultimately, Bittner brings it all back to the preferences of Russian consumers, located far away from the places where the wine was produced, for wines that were sweetened and had grain spirit added to them.

Moreover, the notion that attracting consumers to good quality wine would lure them away from vodka, and hence the perils of alcoholism, ultimately culminated in some unintended outcomes. The reality was that consumers gravitated to *bormotukha*, or souped-up factory products, rather than to the terroir-based wines that some would have preferred to produce. The nadir came with Gorbachev's frontal attack on alcohol, which sought to increase the use of grapes for purposes other than winemaking. The book concludes by noting the return of connoisseurship and the politics of wine between Russia and its former imperial fringes of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine—including, of course, the recent annexation of Crimea.

There is much to savor and reflect upon in this book, especially for those of a more comparative disposition. The chapter on phylloxera, which demonstrates that a blind adherence to chemical solutions (based on a particular reading of Darwin) had fateful consequences, enriches the larger literature on international responses to the threat. For a researcher on South African wine, there are some surprising resonances with respect to the turn to California and even with regard to consumption. If there is something one would want to know a little more about, it is how Georgian peasant producers related to indigenous cultivars and responded to directives from above. But maybe that is a research project all in itself. As things stand, this is a monograph that is to be highly recommended.