THE WAR AND THE DRINK PROBLEM: THE ACTION OF RUSSIA.

BY JOHN NEWTON.

THE Great War in which we are engaged has brought into prominence certain aspects of the drink problem which merit serious consideration. In the present paper I propose to deal with some of these as evidenced by the action of Russia.

SPIRIT MONOPOLY IN RUSSIA.

At the beginning of 1895 the Russian Government took over the whole retail sale of spirits throughout its European provinces. The new vodka shops were opened amidst the blessings of the clergy and with the patronage of the aristocracy, many of whom, of both sexes, sold the first sealed bottles of vodka—a crude, raw spirit, made from rye—to the peasantry. The Government defined its object as an attempt to secure an increased revenue whilst decreasing drunkenness. It certainly secured the former object; it quite as certainly failed completely in the latter. The consumption of vodka rapidly increased until the official estimates of the sales for the year 1914 reached the colossal total of 294,000,000 gallons. As European Russia has a population of 138,000,000, this gives an estimated consumption of 2·13 gallons per head, which is three times the consumption per head in the United Kingdom.

The Petrograd correspondents of the British papers have frequently called attention to the enormous increase of drunkenness in Russia, and to the riots which have taken place in various areas because the women tried to destroy the vodka shops.

On the establishment of the Duma, many hoped that restrictive measures would be adopted. The first and second Dumas, however, failed to deal with the question. The third Duma on

December 20, 1907, passed a resolution "expressing the hope that the Government would restrict the sale of alcohol in the famine-stricken districts." The subject was discussed again in 1908, 1911, and 1912. In the last-named year a Commission was appointed to inquire and report. Three of its recommendations were finally adopted, the most important of which were the reduction of the alcoholic strength of vodka from 40 per cent. to 37 per cent., and the decision to call the attention of the clergy to the evils of alcoholism.

In spite of the fact that large sums of money were allotted to counter-attractions and to temperance societies—said to amount to 4½ millions sterling in the last ten years*—the author of the scheme, Count de Witte, has publicly acknowledged its failure, and he does not now regard the £69,500,000 of net revenue derived from the monopoly as an adequate national compensation for the terrible evils which have shown themselves to the whole nation.

PROHIBITION AND MOBILIZATION.

On the declaration of war with Germany and Austria-Hungary the Russian Government issued an edict closing all the Government vodka shops, of which there were over 26,000, during the period of the mobilization of the Russian armies. It was a wise precaution, as heavy drinking is almost inevitable during such periods of excitement if the facilities are there, as we have recently known in England to our shame, not for the first time. The whole nation seems to have realized the benefits of "no vodka," and innumerable petitions were forwarded to the Government asking for a prolongation of the period of prohibition, with the result that it was decreed on September 7, 1914, that the spirit shops should remain closed until the end of the war.†

Mobilization went on in a quiet and orderly manner, as many press correspondents testified. "None of the reservists or of the civilians were intoxicated. The soldiers, the Cossacks, the sailors, and even the hooligans, were all as sober as judges. To sell a single drop of spirits entailed a fine of £300."‡

* See article by Mr. Francis H. E. Palmer, author of "Russian Life in Town and Country," in *The Alliance News*, July 9, 1914.

† See article entitled "Teetotal Russia," by Francis McCullagh, in *Daily News*, September 18, 1914.

‡ *Ibid.*

THE EFFECTS ON THE ARMY.

Remarkable testimonies have been published as to the wholehearted loyalty with which the Russians have responded to the wishes of their rulers, and as to the beneficial effects of prohibition not only upon the soldiers but upon the people at large.

The Hague Correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* says: "A refugee from East Prussia, describing his experience of the Cossacks in the Berlin *Vorwärts*, relates an interesting incident. An article appeared in a German paper only the other day pointing out that the Russian armies suffered under a tremendous disadvantage owing to the addiction of the soldiers to strong drink and the large quantities allowed them. But this writer relates that when he offered wine to a Cossack officer who came to his house he got the reply, "We are not taking a drop of alcohol on this campaign: it is strictly forbidden; but I should be grateful to you for a cup of tea."*

Professor Pares, Professor of Russian History, Language, and Literature at the University of Liverpool, who has been specially appointed by the Russian Government as press correspondent for the United Kingdom, shows in one of his letters that the Great General Staff of the Russian Armies do not require from the common soldier what they are not prepared to do themselves. He writes: "We were invited to join in the lunch and dinner of the General Staff in their restaurant car. There were no formalities. It was simply a number of fellow-workers having their meals together, without distinction. . . . Among the party there was no alcohol, in accordance with the temperance edict of the Grand Duke and the Chief of the General Staff."†

As far as the stronger liquors are concerned, this report is confirmed by the special correspondent of *The Times*. Writing from the Russian headquarters, he says: "The fare is simple, and the order forbidding strong drink is applied to these staff-officers with the same emphasis as to the peasant or to the cab-driver of Petrograd. Vodka, champagne, and the liqueurs that have always been so dear to the heart of the Russian gentleman, have utterly disappeared, and the Grand Duke himself permits on his own table nothing stronger than claret or white wine. When the men at the very top of the organization deny themselves the refreshment of drinks, it is perfectly obvious that no one else

* *Manchester Guardian*, September 10, 1914.

† *Westminster Gazette*, October 14, 1914.

in the army is getting any, and I think it may be taken as a positive conclusion that there was never a more clear-headed or more sober army in the field than that which is now facing the hordes of the Teuton at this present moment.”*

It is worth while remembering that this is the largest army that has ever been mustered in the field of war within recorded history, and that it is nearly ten times the size of the Grand Army which Napoleon led to destruction in Russia one hundred years ago. Its record so far has shown that it is efficient in the highest degree, and neither in Galicia nor in East Prussia has it shown the slightest tendency to those fiendish barbarities perpetrated by the Germans in Belgium, by which they have branded themselves with infamy for all time.

“The soberness of the army is beyond question. I have not seen a single tipsy or disorderly soldier or officer, and hearsay reports are extremely rare,” so says the *Times* special correspondent at Warsaw.†

A later communication to *The Times* indicates that light wines—“claret or white wine”—have also happily had to go, as far as the army is concerned. Writing from Petrograd, November 15, 1914, “Our Own Correspondent” says: “The Generalissimo has overridden the decision of the Council of Ministers favouring the sale of beer and light wines, and it is ordered that wherever martial law prevails the sale of alcoholic drinks of any kind shall be forbidden. Russia is one of the most democratic of countries, and once the peasant had been deprived of vodka it was unseemly that the wealthier classes should be able to enjoy champagne. But there were other reasons. Drinking had not ceased among the officers of regiments quartered in remote places. This could not be tolerated, and the only remedy was to stop drink everywhere.

In taking the sweeping measures inspired by the Tsar’s temperance policy the Generalissimo only acted in response to the demands of public opinion, as shown by the fact that towns and provinces outside the sphere of martial law voluntarily applied for the prohibition.”‡

As was to be expected, the absence of alcohol does not damp the ardour of the Russian soldier in war, nor retard his recovery

* *The Times*, November 2, 1914.

† *Ibid.*, November 9, 1914.

‡ *Ibid.*, November 16, 1914.

from wounds. Here is an interesting picture drawn by one of *The Times* correspondents in Petrograd : " All the dosshouses and many schools and churches are occupied by the wounded. . . . I accompanied my friend to the dosshouse, an immense building near the Riazansky Station. The chief doctor showed me round. I expected to see a very mournful spectacle, but was agreeably surprised. Not one in twenty of the wounded was lying in bed. Every hall was full of gaiety and life ; the soldiers walking about in their white undergarments, talking, reading, laughing, playing cards ; men with bandaged legs, bandaged hands, heads, bodies, with their bare feet stuffed in hospital slippers. The doctor, who confessed to a great admiration for the English, took me into the operating-room, a place of blood and disinfectant ; into the bandaging-room, where a young soldier was having his arm tied up anew ; into the big basement hall, where the daily cabbage-soup is served out. ' What has happened to the tramps and beggars who used to sleep here o'nights ? ' I asked. ' There are fewer of them,' said the doctor. ' Since the sale of vodka stopped and the war began, the old night population seems to have vanished. I do not know how much good the war will ultimately bring, but the sobriety which it has already brought would justify it.' " *

Probably the same correspondent, writing two months later, gives the following remarkable testimony to the recuperative powers of the Russian soldier. Speaking of the Tsar's visit to the front, he says : " I may note one characteristic episode. The Tsar inquired about the identity and direction of a whole column passing the Imperial train. He was told they were officers and men recovered from their wounds returning to their respective regiments. His Majesty alighted and spoke to them. . . . It was incidentally ascertained that not less than 85 per cent. of those wounded in the early stages of the campaign have now returned to the ranks. " †

How great is the benefit to the Russian army in good conduct and efficiency is shown by " Our Special Correspondent " of *The Times*, who says he is " a citizen of a neutral country," and therefore likely to be an unbiassed observer : " The one thing that impresses the observer more and more each day is the soberness and good behaviour of the Russian troops. I have now been with the army nearly three weeks, and have seen thousands upon thousands of soldiers from all parts of Russia.

* *The Times*, September 22, 1914.

† *Ibid.*, November 17, 1914.

I have yet to see the first drunken or disorderly man connected with the army, either officer or soldier. The dread of soldiery, which is the rule when armies are spread over the land, is absolutely lacking. It is certain that the prohibition of strong drink has worked wonders in the Russian army, and is one of the great factors in the splendid showing, both in the field and in the cities, that is being made by the Russian armies to-day both in Galicia and in the Polish theatre of war.”*

Looking ahead, the Russian Army authorities have made provision for the time when their troops are on foreign soil. The Army Orders provide that when the army occupies a town the whole of the spirit shops are to be closed and no liquor is to be supplied to the troops. This wise action is in striking contrast to the amazing conduct of our own army authorities, who are issuing rum rations to our troops at the front, and sometimes, as we are informed, in the tea given to a section in which are a number of abstainers, who are thus faced with the alternative of either breaking their pledges or going without much-needed refreshment.

In the Russian Navy the rum ration was abolished over twelve months ago. It is a thousand pities that our naval authorities are not equally up to date.

SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE ANTI-ALCOHOL ACTION IN RUSSIA.

Great as are the beneficial effects of prohibition on the Army, established by universal testimony, not less are the good results upon the people at large. This is what Mr. Stephen Graham, Special Correspondent of *The Times* in Russia says: “The air is full of hope. All vodka shops have been closed for a month, and Russia at a word from the Tsar has taken on the appearance of sobriety. It has been impossible to obtain alcoholic liquors of any kind, and as a consequence drunkenness has disappeared from the streets, and with it a great army of beggars, who only beg that they may gather twenty kopeks for a bottle. The absence of vodka has made a great blank in the peasants’ lives, but that blank has been filled up by the war and the interest in the war. Ordinarily the peasants feel that they have nothing to do but drink, but now it is otherwise. It is as if in war they found the real reason for existence, as if in death they found the object of living.”†

* *The Times*, November 19, 1914.

† *Ibid.*, September 15, 1914.

THE EVIDENCE OF CHANGED VILLAGES.

Mr. Francis McCullagh, special correspondent of the *Daily News*, writes: "These petitions" (for permanent prohibition) "generally come from the Zemstvos,* but all sorts and conditions of men are writing to the papers to tell how much every part of the country has changed for the better since the war began.

"‘The old women in the villages,’ writes a country vicar in the *Novoye Vremya*, ‘can hardly believe their eyes and ears, so changed are their menfolk. Not a hard word, not a row, but everywhere peace, kindness, and industry. War is said to be hell, but this is like a foretaste of heaven.’

"So tremendous is the improvement, indeed, that even at the end of the war there will doubtless be an agitation for the abolition of the liquor traffic altogether, and the conversion of Russia into what the Americans would call a ‘dry’ empire."† So may it be.

Both the Tsar and his Ministers seem thoroughly alive to the terrible evils of alcoholism. The writer just quoted informs us that the Tsar has plainly expressed his wish that temperance may be promoted among his people, and that the Minister of Finance (Mr. P. L. Barck), has declared that if Russia makes the great sacrifice of doing without the liquor money altogether, "the people will be healthier and the State will be stronger." Mr. Barck thinks that it may be one of the best things done for Russia since the emancipation of the serfs.

To meet the dislocation of industry involved in the stoppage of the spirit traffic, "it is proposed to develop the use of spirits for purposes of combustion and illumination, as an auxiliary to the production of mineral oil. As for the loss of revenue, this can unquestionably, and in a very short time, be made good from sources which merely await the industrial development of the country in order to become abundant."‡

THE QUICKENING OF THRIFT AND INDUSTRY.

"The effects of the enforced sobriety throughout Russia," says "Our Own Correspondent" of the *Morning Post* at Petrograd, "have proved to the population how beneficial the Government

* Provincial Administrative Councils.

† *Daily News*, September 18, 1914.

‡ "From a Correspondent lately in Russia," *The Times*, October 26, 1914.

measures have been. Village women are openly saying that heaven has come upon earth, and this in the midst of the most bloody war ever known in history. . . . From many centres, especially from country districts, petitions keep coming in, begging that the present total prohibition, which extends for the duration of the war, may be made perpetual.

“Moscow, which is always the surest gauge of the Russian temperament, is to-day opening a series of new savings’ banks, and the necessity for increased accommodation in this respect is being felt all over the country.”*

Absence of liquor, as we have for half a century argued in this country, means an increased output for labour, as well as a better quality of labour. Hear what *The Times* “Own Correspondent” at Petrograd says: “The Tsar’s decision for ever to suppress the State sale of vodka has met with a chorus of approval. I learn that the spread of temperance has already resulted in the increase of the output capacity of labour by 25 per cent.; so that, for instance, the coal and agricultural industries will produce even more than they did last year, despite the absence of the enormous number of reservists who are now in the field.”†

END OF THE GOVERNMENT MONOPOLY.

The Russian Christian Temperance Society, of which the Grand Duke Constantine is the President, petitioned the Tsar in October last to prohibit the sale of spirituous liquors absolutely. The Grand Duke received this epoch-making reply from the Tsar: “*I have decided to prohibit for ever in Russia the Government sale of alcohol.*”‡

“The Tsar from the first,” says this *Times* correspondent, “was determined that the war should be in every sense a war of liberation for his people.”

Thus ends, after a disastrous history of nearly twenty years, the most colossal experiment of a Government-owned monopoly of the spirit traffic of which we have any knowledge.

It certainly provided a huge revenue for the Russian Government, but at a cost which every observer described in lurid terms. The Russian peasantry was heading straight for destruc-

* *Morning Post*, October 17, 1914. † *The Times*, October 22, 1914.

‡ *Ibid.*, October 26, 1914. Another version is: “I had already decided to prohibit for ever in Russia the Government sale of vodka.”

tion under the influence of vodka, and the vodka-sellers were gradually taking whole villages in pawn over vast tracts of European Russia. Already, some writers say, after only a few months of prohibition, the peasants are saving money with the object of becoming the owners of the land they cultivate, and a new interest in life is appearing before their minds, hitherto steeped in the stupidity and hopelessness of alcoholism.

“An entirely new spirit, they told me, has taken hold of the people. It commenced with the mobilization, but its effects are now deeply rooted in the peasantry. Russia has become suddenly sober, and a new joy has spread itself throughout the Empire.”*

In a leading article on the subject, *The Times* says : “The great victory over drunkenness in Russia has received far too little attention in this country. Since China proscribed opium the world has seen nothing like it. We have been well reminded that in sternly prohibiting the sale of spirituous liquor Russia has already vanquished a greater foe than the Germans.”† Why cannot we follow Russia’s splendid example ?

* G. F. Steward, Special Correspondent, *Daily News*, October 6, 1914.

† *The Times*, September 21, 1914.