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Abstract

This paper clarifies the multi-faceted adoption process of tea in Russia from the seventeenth till nineteenth century. Socio-cultural history of tea had not been well-studied field in the Soviet historiography, but in the recent years, some of historians work on this theme because of the diversification of subjects in the Russian historiography. The paper provides an overview of early encounters of tea in Russia in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, comparing with other beverages that were drunk at that time. The paper sheds light on the two supply routes of tea to Russia, one from Mongolia and China, and the other from Europe. Drinking of brick tea did not become a custom in the 18th century, but tea consumption had bloomed since 19th century, rapidly increasing the import of tea. The main part of the paper clarifies how Russian- Chinese trade at Khakhta had been interrelated to the consumption of tea in Russia. Finally, the paper shows how the Russian tea culture formation followed a different path from that of the tea culture of Europe.

1. Introduction

In contemporary Russia, drinking tea is universally recognized as a widely adopted aspect of traditional culture. In the inefficient labor environment of the Soviet era, the phrase “*chai pop'em*” (let's drink tea) signaled the beginning of a long break; this phrase permeated all corners of society—from homes to cafeterias—as a signifier that time and space were being intimately shared. Even from the perspective of foreigners, a happy family sitting around a table with a large samovar characterized Russian culture. However, is this kind of culture really traditional to Russia? When did the custom of drinking tea first take hold? Data from previous studies showed that it took just over 200 years before tea became a favorite indulgence in Russia; tea passed through a number of stages in each social class, slowly becoming inextricably entwined with all of them.

In modern Russia, many people study sociocultural history, but few took up such topics during the Soviet era; for example, there is little Soviet-era research on Russian merchants. This is because in the socialist Soviet Union it was improper to study bourgeoisie history, and little importance was given to the study of entrepreneurs and their ilk. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent democratization, sociocultural historical studies—which had previously received limited treatment—now commanded attention. Experienced researchers began publishing research results on new topics, writing on the contents of a range of archived historical materials. B.N. Mironov's *Social History of Imperial Russia* (1999) is one such general informational text that sheds light on the formation and transition of social classes in Imperial Russia.¹

¹ B.N. Mironov, *Sotsial'naiia istoriia Rossii, T.1-2*, SPb., 1999.

Historical studies on tea in Russia first began to appear in the Imperial Era. Most of these studies included discussions of the tea trade since tea was the most profitable product traded with China during the Qing Dynasty. A.P. Subbotin (1852–1906) conducted extensive and systematic study of the tea trade in the Imperial Era, publishing the following books: *Materials in the Russian Economy and Commercial Transportation in Eastern Russia and Siberia: An Economic Study of the Problems of Connecting Russia and Siberia by Rail* in 1885, and *Tea and the Tea Trade in Russia and Abroad: Tea Production and Demand* in 1892. These publications not only presented statistical data, but also delved into Russia's international relations with the Qing Empire, Inner Asia, England, and other European countries. Although these books are known to contain a number of errors, the research documented in them has many implications, even today.² Several primary historical materials, such as the accounts of Russian tea merchants, were also published during the Imperial Era in Russia, providing many sources that can be used for research today. However, studies on the Russian tea trade stagnated during the Soviet era. This is due not only to the ideological reasons mentioned above, but also to an interruption in Subbotin's data and a shift in attention from the history of the tea trade to the history of diplomacy and international relations between Russian and the Qing Empire.

The historian Vil'iam Pokhlebkin (1923–2000) renewed scholarly interest in tea from the perspective of ethnic cuisine in the Soviet Union. Pokhlebkin was an expert in the history of international relations, from antiquity to the modern era, between Russia and Scandinavia and was a member of the Academy of Sciences. He also published nearly 50 studies on ethnic cuisine and food in the Soviet ethnic republics and abroad, including a 1968 work on the history of tea.³ However, Pokhlebkin's interest lay primarily in ethnic cuisine and cultures, so even his work on tea consisted primarily of recipes. Although not much was written on historical relations in his work on tea, a general review of the recipes he included gives us concrete insights into how tea came to be drunk in Russia. His studies became the authority for cookbooks during the Soviet era; no other history scholars dealt with the topic. Even topographical studies and histories of international relations written during the Soviet era that incidentally touch upon tea do not treat tea itself as a major theme. In contrast, R.E.F. Smith and D. Christian, American scholars on Russia, published a history of food and drink in Russia that adopts a social and economic viewpoint.⁴

However, recent studies on tea in Russia are demonstrating a wider breadth, tackling social history, the history of daily life, and the history of urban Moscow. *Moscow Tea Merchants, Their Families, Ancestors, and Descendants: The 1700s to 1990s*, published by I.A. Sokolov as a handbook in 2009, reviews how tea circulated in the Russian Empire from the perspective of merchants.⁵ His 2010 doctoral candidate (*kandidat*) dissertation, *Tea and the Tea Trade in the Russian Empire in the Early Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, goes one step further, analyzing how tea was socially received.⁶ In addition to these, *Tea and Vodka in Russian Advertising in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, published in 2008 as a collection of studies by sociocultural historians including

² A.P. Subbotin, *Materialy dlia Ekonomicheskogo izucheniia Rossii. Torgovye soobshcheniia Vostochnoi Rossii i Sibiri. Nauchno-ekonomicheskoe issledovanie v sviazi s voprosom o rel'sovom soedinenii Rossii s Sibir'iu*, SPb., 1885; A.P. Subbotin, *Chai i chainaia torgovlia v Rossii i drugikh gosudarstvakh. Proizvodstvo, potreblenie chaia*, SPb., 1892.

³ V.V. Pokhlebkin, *Chai, ego tipy, svoistva, upotreblenie*, M.: Leg., 1981; V.V. Pokhlebkin, *Chai i vodka v istorii Rossii*, Krasnoiar'sk, 1995; M. Numano, K. Numano. *Sekai no syokubunka 19. Rosia*, Nobun'you. 2006, pp. 285-287.

⁴ R.E.F. Smith and David Christian, *Bread and salt. A social and economic history of food and drink in Russia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984.

⁵ I.A. Sokolov, *Chaetorgovtsy Moskvy, Chleny ikh semei, nekotorye predki i otdel'nye potomki: 1700-e—1990-e gody*, M., 2008.

⁶ I.A. Sokolov, *Chai i chainaia torgovlia v Rossiiskoi imperii v XIX-nachale XX vekov, Dissertatsia na soiskanie uchenoi stepeni kandidata istoricheskikh nauk*. M., 2010.

Sokolov,⁷ shows that in Russia today studies on the history of tea culture are alive and well. Although this paper relies heavily on these other recent studies, it discusses the differences and commonalities in how tea culture in Russia is perceived in European countries such as Holland and England and considers the history of trade in Kyakhta, a Siberian city on the border with China (present-day Mongolia).

2. Before tea arrived

Just what did Russians drink before tea arrived from Asia? Since long ago, the drinks of choice of the Russian people have been *sbiten'* (or *zbiten'*), *kvas*, and *med* (*medovukha*). *Sbiten'* is a warm drink made by boiling alcohol, vinegar, syrup, and spices.⁸ Although various ingredients go into *sbiten'*, herbs are typically included. With its low alcohol content, it has apparently been enjoyed since around the start of the 15th century. It was initially sold at markets but made its way into homes in the 17th century, where it was known as a folk prophylactic for scurvy.⁹ The adoption of tea in Russia is closely tied to *sbiten'*. *Sbiten'* sellers were still operating until the 19th century in Russia, but their numbers waned as tea grew in popularity, until the sellers disappeared altogether. In short, the adoption of tea by the Russian people is also a history of *sbiten's* demise.

Loved by Russians since before even *sbiten'* is *kvas*. *Kvas* is a sour and refreshing carbonated drink made from wheat varieties (e.g., rye and barley), honey, and apples.¹⁰ Although its taste cannot be adequately described, one might liken it to cola. *Kvas* is a common drink in places such as farms and it can be produced with not only wheat but also bread. Unlike *sbiten'*, *kvas* is fermented, so although it does contain some alcohol, the percentage is low enough that children can still enjoy it. On top of that, *okroshka*, a popular chilled Russian soup served in summer, is made primarily from *kvas*, cucumber, and herbs. A number of other Russian soups are also made with *kvas*, and it is therefore a drink that has symbolized Slavic culture since well before the influence of European culinary culture.

Now as much as ever, “Russian beverages” evoke a strong image of vodka, but spirits—including vodka and beer—arrived on the scene in the 16th century. *Med* is a Russian alcoholic beverage dating even further back, generally described as “a hoppy beverage made from honey.” The oldest record of *med* dates to the year 945, making it the oldest beverage that Russians have continued to drink. There are many variations in how it is produced, including adding berries to the standard honey.¹¹ In *Bread and Salt*, Smith and Christian point out that spirits came to Russia around 1515 from Western Europe.¹² Even after this, however, spirits were still not commonplace, garnering government interest as a taxable item only when they began being sold in the 17th century.

Looked at in this way, we see that honey is used in all popular Russian traditional drinks: *sbiten'*, *kvas*, and *med*. This is because Russians have been beekeeping since ancient times; in fact, beeswax was a principal export of Russia through the Middle Ages. These days, one rarely sees *sbiten'* even in Russian cafeterias and cafes. It has been completely abandoned in Russian culinary culture. The inclusion of tea—and even vodka—as part of Russian “traditional culinary culture” is surprisingly recent.

⁷ V.A. Kornilov, N.M. Petrukhnenko (red.), *Chai i vodka v russkoi reklame XIX-nachala XX vekov*, M., 2008.

⁸ *Slovar' russkogo iazyka. XI–XVII vv. T.23*, M., 1996, p.74.

⁹ M. Nimano, K. Numano, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁰ *Slovar' russkogo iazyka. XI–XVII vv. T. 7*, M., 1980, pp.103-104.

¹¹ *Slovar' russkogo iazyka. XI–XVII vv. T. 9*, M., 1982, pp.53-54.

¹² R.E.F. Smith and David Christian, *Bread and salt*, 2008, pp.100-101.

3. The appearance of tea in Russia

It is said that Russian Cossacks first encountered tea in the 16th century. However, it was not until 1638 that Russians brought actual tea into Russia, with this event being the result of internal strife between Mongolian feudal lords that broke out right around the time of China's dynastic change from the Ming to the Qing Empire. In 1631, Altyn Khan (III) of Khalkha offered to swear allegiance to Russia to protect himself from the advance of rival Ligdan Khan of Chahar. In 1635–1636, Russia dispatched an envoy to make Altyn Khan sign a written oath swearing his allegiance, but Altyn Khan would not agree to do so. In 1638, Vasilii Starkov was sent to obtain his signature; however, Altyn Khan, still reluctant to sign the oath, rebuffed Starkov, complaining that Tsar Mikhail Fedorovich was not complying with his request, and threatened Starkov and his company. In return for gifts sent by Tsar Mikhail, Altyn Khan presented him with 200 packets of Chinese-made tea, which Starkov was not happy with and was almost forced against his will to take it. Altyn Khan prevailed, however, arguing that 200 packets of tea were equivalent to 100 lengths of zibeline. This is known to be the first tea brought to Russia. Ultimately, Altyn Khan did not sign the oath of allegiance. Tsar Mikhail banished the emissary of Khan sent to Russia with Starkov without giving an audience and broke off relations between the two countries. Because Russians did not realize the value or usefulness of the tea that had been brought all the way back to Russia, it is unclear what happened to the gift that ultimately led to a breakdown in negotiations.¹³

Smith and Christian surmise that it was not Starkov who first brought back tea but, in fact, Vasilii Tyumenets, who was sent to visit Altyn Khan in 1616.¹⁴ Their conjecture relies on the information of Kh. Trusevich, who mentioned that Tyumenets was the first of the Russians to drink tea with Altyn Khan.¹⁵ In either case, Fyodor Baikov, sent from Russia to Beijing in 1654, brought back a little tea, and the Perfil'ev delegation sold off all the tea that was gifted to them in 1658 in Beijing.¹⁶ Subbotin, the Russian economic historian, claims that after Starkov was compelled to bring tea back to Russia in 1638, all the tea that came to Russia was consumed by Moscow's imperial court and the Russian upper class.¹⁷ However, it does not appear that Russia of the 1650s recognized tea's potency or its value as a product, or that there would be much demand for it.

Clear testimony that tea was drunk in Russia is found in the record of the Englishman Samuel Collins, who served as a physician to Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich. According to Collins, tea (teah or tey) and anise were brought from Siberia in 1671 and merchants said that they added sugar to these as a special remedy for lung disease.¹⁸

From the description of Collins, we learn that tea was consumed in Russia at that time as a medicine. This phenomenon also occurred in Holland when tea first appeared there. Johann Filipp Kilburger, who visited Moscow as an attendant in Sweden's Oxenstierna delegation in 1673–1674, affirmed that tea was sold in Moscow markets at 30 kopecks per funt (about 409.5 g).¹⁹ It is said that the Dutch and Portuguese transported this tea via the northern port city of Arkhangelsk. In Moscow

¹³ Yoshida Kinichi, *Rosia no tohosinshyutsu to neruchinsuku joutyaku*. Toyobunko. 1984. pp. 21-25.

¹⁴ R.E.F. Smith and David Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

¹⁵ Kh. Trusevich, *Posol'skie i Torgovyie snosheniya Rossii s Kitaem*. M., 1882, pp.4-5.

¹⁶ R.E.F. Smith and David Christian, *op. cit.*, pp. 228-229.

¹⁷ A.P. Subbotin, *Chai i chainaia torgovlia v Rossii i drugikh gosudarstvakh. Proizvodstvo, potreblenie chaia*. SPb., 1892, pp.189-190.

¹⁸ S. Collins, *The Present State of Russia*, London, 1671, pp.75-76; R.E.F. Smith and David Christian. *op. cit.*, p. 229.

¹⁹ M.P. Fedorov, *Sopernichestvo torgovykh interesov na Vostoke*, SPb., 1903, p.85; E.P. Silin, *Kyakhta v XVIII veke*, Irkutsk, 1946, p.145.

in the 1640s, merchants disgruntled by the intervention of English merchants in the Russian domestic market caused a riot in the city, prompting Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich to use the Puritan Revolution as a pretext for revoking the privilege of England's Moscow Company to operate in the Moscow markets. As a result, Russian trade came to be monopolized by Dutch merchants. Due to their trade in Asia, the Dutch and Portuguese during this period had the custom of drinking tea. From this, it can be deduced that tea brought to Moscow was imported through the Dutch East India Company, which included not only that the tea brought via Batavia but also tea brought in from Indian colonies by Portuguese traders. From other evidence, it is known that Russians put sugar in their tea and used it as a stomach medicine.²⁰ Russia in the late 17th century was coming to adopt tea as a medicine, as was the practice in Europe.

However, due to the Treaty of Nerchinsk, even as caravans began to be dispatched from Russia to Beijing, tea was not an essential traded commodity. After Kyakhta was established as a center of free trade²¹ between Russia and China in 1727, tea began filtering into Russia by way of state-run companies in Beijing and Kyakhta, but the main imports from China were still cotton and silk fabrics. Between 1680 and 1720, as tea consumption rose in Europe, Russians finally began to regard tea as a commodity.

4. Asian and European tea drinking

As discussed above, although Russians found out about tea by way of Mongolia, it was by way of Europe that the custom of drinking tea began to take hold. Why did Russians adopt tea via Europe rather than adopt the custom of drinking tea directly from Asia? One reason is that Russians saw the Asian way of preparing tea using brick tea, in which salt and butter are added and the mixture is boiled into a soup. The Scottish physician John Bell (a foreigner in the service of Pyotr I), who accompanied a caravan from Russia to Beijing in 1719–1721, stayed for a time with the Buryat Mongols. They served him tea made by boiling bohea tea with meal and butter in a cauldron, which Bell claimed was not bad. Although he took an interest in the tea itself, Bell wrote that it could have been better if it were made in a more hygienic way. He took some tea home as a souvenir with the aim of getting European women to serve it.²²

The Asian (in this case, Mongolian) way of drinking tea, however, was hardly adopted by the Russian public at all. First, the brick tea itself did not suit Russian tastes; they viewed the tea drunk by indigenous Siberians as a novelty and dismissed it as simply a custom of different ethnic groups. In 1792, Aleksandr Nikolaevich Radishchev (1749–1802), exiled to Ilimsk, a city near the eastern Siberian capital of Irkutsk, sent a letter to his former boss, Aleksandr Romanovich Vorontsov, laying out his opinions on trade in Kyakhta, which had been shut down in 1785 on the orders of the Qing government. Sent to Siberia by Ekaterina II for criticizing the serfdom system in *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* (1790), Radischev was originally a finance official working at Kommerts-kollegia (Collegium of Commerce) and the St. Petersburg customs office, so he was well versed in economic issues. Although he did not have an opportunity to visit Kyakhta directly because he was in exile, he apparently did have the chance to look over customs documents from the time when

²⁰ E.P. Silin, *Kyakhta v XVIII veke, Iz istorii rusko-kitaiskoi torgovli*, Irkutsk, pp.145-146.

²¹ Of course, Kyakhta trade was not 'free trade' in the modern sense and there were several restrictions in trading. Here, 'free trade' means trade between private merchants, which differed from tributary trade in Beijing. Both the Russian and Qing governments were concerned about the outflow of silver from their empires and they prohibited the exchange of commodities for money in Kyakhta. In actuality, Russian and Chinese merchants often paid money for commodities illegally, or exchanged silverware for goods, and so on.

²² John Bell, *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Peking, 1719-22*, Edinburgh University, 1965, p. 86; E.P. Silin, *op. cit.*, p.166.

trade was active in Kyakhta. He noted the following in his letter:

There is no need to speak on the fact that wherever there is tea, there is demand for it. While everyone in Russia has this custom to the extent that everybody knows about it, I for one will not stop stressing this as long as bringing in tea means trading with Poland. The list of the border customs house shows that a significant volume of tea is being taken out of the country, and you know how “correct” the previous list is. In terms of value and volume (if my list is reliable), more brick tea is consumed than all luxury goods: it can be found in Russia, is sold throughout Siberia, and there is great demand for it, particularly in Irkutsk Province from Buryats and Russians living in Zabaikal’e. They cannot live without tea, and they will not drink tea brought in from Poland.²³

In 1792, trade in Kyakhta had been halted since 1785, so Radischev wrote this letter to argue that Russian losses would be small even if trade with China were not reopened. Brick tea consumed by Siberian residents and Buryats in Zabaikal’e was regarded as something consumed by ethnic groups and did not affect Russian consumption, which suggests the possibility that leaf tea was being brought into Russia by way of Poland. Radischev continues his letter below.

...as shown above, the major products going from China to Russia are cotton textiles, namely kitaika or daba, tea, silk cloth, raw silk, and twine. There is demand for kitaika and tea not only in Siberia but in Russia as well, while silk is consumed almost exclusively at manufacturing plants in Moscow. Almost all daba and fanza is consumed in Siberia, while some zoli and other silk products are consumed in Russia and the rest in Siberia.

Similarly, the price of tea rises when there is no trading in Kyakhta, so some people have to give up this custom and drink coffee instead of tea. However, rather than change this custom, people unable to drink anything else drink tea brought in from England, Holland, and Denmark, consequently paying double or quadruple the price, consequently increasing the amount of tea coming in from all ports, especially St. Petersburg. The poor, who mimic the rich by drinking tea during celebrations and banquets and have begun to succumb to the slow epidemic, consume veronika (any plant of the genus Veronica) and thyme leaves if they live in Russia, substituting the so-called herb lugovoi chai if they live in Siberia. However, Buryats in Zabaikal’e and Russians, used to consuming it from when they were young, squander their money on brick tea brought in from China, the volume of which exceeded demand in all of Russia, which utterly agitates trading in Kyakhta to a complete stop and invites tranquility on the many families in poverty...

In this way, the Zabaikal’e people drank up all the tea until they had used up all their assets. They have transformed their sheep, cows, horses, and their grains to simple things; their fields remain unfurrowed and their harvests unreaped. Then, when all possibility of getting hold of tea disappears, they consume herbs instead. In my opinion, these take nothing away from the utility of tea. The reason is because the ingestion of herbs by Siberian people does not harm them and is in fact nutritious and good for their health. Tea and herbs are more like secondary nutrients than primary nutrients.²⁴

In his letter, Radischev emphasizes that although consumption of brick tea was high in

²³ A.N. Radischev, Pis'mo o kitaiskom torge. (1792), *Polnoe sobranie sochnenii. A.N. Radishchev, T.II*, M., 1907, p. 61.

²⁴ A.N. Radishchev, *op.cit.*, pp.87-88.

Zabaikal'e, where Russians too had begun to drink it, during the period when trading at Kyakhta had been ceased they had come to consume other herbs as a replacement beverage. Buryats did not just purchase tea from Russians engaged in trading at Kyakhta, they participated in the Kyakhta market themselves, purchasing tea directly from the Chinese. However, we need to take into consideration that this letter was written at a time when the composition of imported items in the Kyakhta market was undergoing a major shift. Furthermore, we cannot take Radischev's opinion on faith; he was critical of the English-style free market approach and wrote from that perspective. Even if we consider that trends in the consumption of tea by indigenous people and Russians differed, this is because the increase in tea consumption by Russians coincides perfectly with the discontinuation of trading in Kyakhta.

5. Tea consumption takes hold

5.1. Tea consumption spreads to the nobility and the wealthy class

Ostensibly, Russians violated the principles of tariff-free trade, and so the Kyakhta trade was actually a fundamental factor in the worsening of diplomatic relations with the Qing Empire over security concerns in the border region, stopping trading a total of 10 times. The initial halt was comparatively short (just a few days), but the shutdowns of 1762–68, 1778–80, and 1785–92 extended over long periods of time. Although Radischev did not pay it much attention, Buryats were not exactly unable to obtain brick tea: they were smuggling it even when the market was shut down. Our interest, however, is tea consumption among the general Russian public.

According to Trusevich's data, tea accounted for 10.7% of the total value of all commodities imported into Russia through the Kyakhta market in 1751, 3.4% in 1759–61, and 15.6% in 1775–77 and 1780–81. Although small, brick tea for consumption by Buryats and other indigenous peoples tended to surpass other varieties of tea.²⁵ Figure 1 shows the volume of tea imported through Kyakhta.

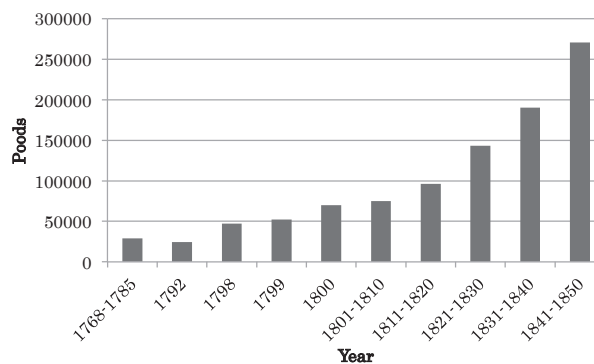


Figure 1. Weight of tea imported to Russia through Kyakhta

Source: A. Korsak, *Istoriko-statisticheskoe obozrenie torgovykh snoshenii Rossii s Kitaem*, Kazan', 1857, p. 293. (Pood is a Russian unit of mass. 1 pood is 16.38 kg)

²⁵ Kh. Trusevich, *op.cit.*, pp. 270-272.

Furthermore, we get a different image from statistics on the value of tea imported into Russia between 1749 and 1792. Specifically, Sokolov examines data given by I.M. Kulisher (1878–1933).

From Sokolov's calculations, we can see that the value of tea imported into Russia did not grow much during the 1778–80 Kyakhta market shutdown compared with the period when it was active between 1758 and 1760. In contrast, the value of imported tea rose by several orders of magnitude during the market shutdown of 1790–92.²⁶ As attested to by Radischev, instead of obtaining tea via Kyakhta, it was imported by sea during this period from ports in western Russia. According to Chulkov, who published all commerce-related data in Russia from that time in the latter part of the 18th century, the main import sources included England, Amsterdam, and German cities such as Lubeck and Hamburg.²⁷ American economic historian Arcadius Kahan (1920-1982) shows data on the main beverages imported to St. Petersburg from 1768 to 1788, but we can see only beer, ale, wine and coffee in this data.²⁸ Beer and ale are imported from Baltic cities, wine is imported from France or Portugal, and coffee might be imported from various countries through Amsterdam or other Baltic ports. Kahan also notes, "Although there were some substitutes for black tea for the population of European Russia, there were no substitutes for "brick tea" in the Far East and Siberia, or for green tea in other parts of Asiatic Russia."²⁹ At least, the demand for brick tea was only in Asiatic Russia in the 18th century. But from 1792, after the reopening of trade in Kyakhta, demand for general types of leaf tea increased gradually.

We can see in Figure 2 that tea makes up an overwhelmingly high percentage of total imports since 1812, especially when compared with imports to Kyakhta since the 19th century.

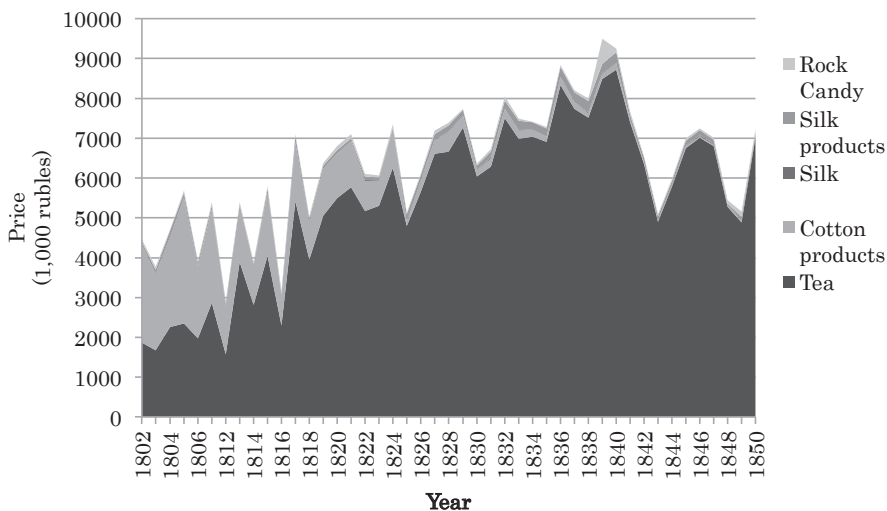


Figure 2. Main commodities of Russian imports from China

Source: *Trudy statisticheskogo otdeleniia departamenta tamozhennykh sborov. Statisticheskiiia svedeniia o torgovle Rossii s Kitaem*, SPb., 1909, pp.8–9.

²⁶ I. A. Sokolov, *Chai i chainaia torgovliia v Rossii: 1790-1919gg.*, M., 2012, p. 30. (based on the data: I.M. Kulisher, Sost. I.V. Kuriayev, *Istoriia russkoi torgovli i promyshlennosti*, Cheliabinsk, 2003, pp. 261-262; N. Semenov, *Izucheniie istoricheskikh svedeniia o rossiiskoi vneshnei torgovle i promyshlennosti*. T. 3, 1859, pp.73–74)

²⁷ M.D. Chulkov, *Istoriicheskoe opisaniie Rossiiskoi kommersii*. T.VI, ii, 242; R.E.F. Smith and David Christian, *op. cit.*, p.233.

²⁸ A.Kahan, *The Plow, the Hammer and the Knout. An Economic History of 18th-Century Russia*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1985, pp. 194-195.

²⁹ A.Kahan, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

This demand for tea began among the Russian aristocracy and then spread to wealthy merchants. The trend of drinking tea as a show of wealth grew in popularity, prompting the manufacture of samovars as discussed below. One book on the history of Moscow explains that the sales base of tea during the 18th and 19th centuries was in Moscow and other cities that held large markets periodically. Nevertheless, even in the beginning of the 19th century, tea was still an expensive luxury good, often stored on noble estates in a lockbox in the proprietress's bedroom.³⁰ By the end of the 1700s, tea, offering a precious and indulgent pastime, was usually served with teaware produced specifically in the European style. People would add a lump of sugar, as they did in England (powdered sugar was avoided as it clouds the tea), or add rum.³¹ Thus, the custom of drinking tea in Russia took hold along with the adoption of a European-style tea culture and the importation of tea by sea from European countries. The drinking of tea spread downward from the nobility and the wealthy, and ultimately shifted the Kyakhta trade to primarily tea after 1792.

Although imports of brick tea grew along with the rise in volume of tea imported from Kyakhta after 1792, brick tea was imported by Siberian merchants, including merchants from Irkutsk. The reason for this is that customs duties on brick tea were cheaper than on bohea, a loose-leaf tea.³² Moscow merchants initially led the way on importing bohea, but bohea imports by Irkutsk merchants began to grow from around 1819–20, prompting a sudden rise in bohea trade volume by 1829. The taste for tea spread widely among the merchant class. A major characteristic of tea drinking culture in Russia is that there were no public spaces for drinking such as coffeehouses in Europe. Tea was almost exclusively drunk in homes and taverns (called *traktir* or *kabak*). Taverns were systematized in the 17th century so that the government could regulate alcohol sales, and tea became a regular feature at taverns. Merchants drank tea with business associates during negotiations so much that the act of drinking tea in taverns became an extension of work. In the first half of the 19th century, the main consumers of tea were merchants and the aristocracy.

French writer Marquis de Custine (1790–1857), who wrote on his travels in Russia in 1839, notes the following about the irony of Russian tea drinking: “Russians, even the poorest, have a tea set and copper samovar at home, drinking tea with their family morning and night.”³³ Compared with Europe, where the act of drinking tea was associated with sociability and sophistication in one's public life, the custom of poor Russian commoners drinking tea at home around a samovar seemed a miserable image to Custine. In the 19th century, however, it was this growth in the active tea-drinking population to even the poor that supported the expansion of tea consumption in Russia.

P. Kiszke Zgierskii published a book on commerce in the city of St. Petersburg in 1831. The image below (Photo 1) shows an advertisement for the silverware and goldware shop of the merchant Kudryashev, which highlights the type of tea set commonly sold in Russia during this period.³⁴ The main item for sale at this shop was tea services, drawn on the left side. They were just like European tea sets and were likely a Saxonian or British in origin, as Saxonian tea sets were also transported to Kyakhta and sold to Chinese merchants.

³⁰ E.A. Tonchu (Avtor proekta), T.A. Fedoseeva (Avtor sost.), *Vypei chaiku. Zabudesh tosku*, M., 2006, p.12.

³¹ E.A. Tonchu, T.A. Fedoseeva, *op.cit.*, pp.16-17.

³² A. Korsak, *Istoriko-statisticheskoe obozrenie torgovykh snoshenii Rossii s Kitaem*, pp.295-297.

³³ A. de. Coustin, V. Mil'chinois (Per.s fr. pod red.), *Rossiiia v 1839 godu. T.I*, M., 1996. p. 317; I.A. Sokolov, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

³⁴ V. Kishkin-Zhgierskii, *Kommercheskii ukazatel' goroda St.-Peterburga, sostablennyi Vikentiem Kishkinym-Zhgierskim (P.Kiszke-Zgierskiego), raznykh uchenykh obschestv i inostranykh Akademii deistvitel'nykh chlenom i kabalerom*, SPb., 1831, p.15.



Photo 1. Advertisement of silverware and goldware in the shop of the merchant Kudryashev

The next example (Photo 2) is an advertisement for tea, which is found in P. Kiszke-Zgierskii’s book. This advertisement is for the Chinese tea shop of the merchant Belkov, which was located near Anichkov Palace on Nevskii Avenue.³⁵ The drawings of Chinese people are stereotypical images (with mistakes in costumes) that were commonly associated with tea in this period. It is very interesting that in this shop, black tea was much cheaper than other types of tea. For instance, the price of ordinary black tea was 4 rubles 50 kopecks for one funt (409.5 g), high-grade tea named “Tsvetochny” was priced from 10 to 18 rubles per funt, Chinese branded white tea (here we can see the mark of My-Yu-Min Dzi and others) was priced from 20 to 30 rubles per funt, and green tea was priced from 10 to 35 rubles per funt. In this period, tea imported from Canton by British and other European ships was prohibited and all tea sold in St. Petersburg “must” have been transported from Kyakhta through Moscow. The demand for “Tsvetochny” or Green tea was not large, but higher tariffs were imposed on these higher-grade types of tea than ordinary black tea. And in St. Petersburg, aristocrats and wealthy merchants could afford to buy these expensive tea varieties.

From the examples we have seen above, in the first part of the 19th century, tea was still an expensive and luxury beverage that wealthy people could allow themselves to buy. However, ordinary Russians were also interested in tea. This is demonstrated by the fact that Russian farmers began to have samovars in the first half of the 19th century.

³⁵ V. Kishkin-Zhgierskii, *op.cit.*, p.14.



Photo 2. Advertisement for the Chinese tea shop of the merchant Belkov.

5.2. Tea drinking and the samovar

The establishment of tea drinking in Russia is closely related to the popularization of samovars. Samovars themselves are expensive metal products, so having one in each home was impossible in the 18th century. What we recognize as a modern samovar is a self-boiler in Russian. Samovars have a hollow tube on the inside for burning charcoal; this is surrounded by a chamber for boiling water. Although there is still controversy as to when samovars adopted their modern form, the manufacturing of teaware, such as the kettles that served as a prototype for the samovar, began in the Ural Mountains at the Demidov factory. The Demidov family of blacksmiths played a key role in the Ural steel industry through the Reforms of Pyotr and were also involved in manufacturing steel products. Copper teaware was first produced in the 1730s. However, these goods were not much different from the jugs and kettles found in Europe. Among these items, the first record of what is called a samovar comes from the document describing “a list of the number and sales prices of various names of copper tableware produced in 1745 and passed on to the noble Grigorii Akin’evich Demidov.” In another document the phrase “two bronze samovars with pipes” is written. Here, a “pipe” refers to the spout and at the time the document was written “samovar” referred to a kettle of universal shape.³⁶

The type of kettle in which water is heated by charcoal in a brass base (see Photo 3) was called a *bul’otki*, and this type of kettle was already produced in Europe in the 17th century, and imitations were also made in Russia. However, the *bul’otki* is shaped quite differently from a samovar. Smith and Christian view a type of hot-water heater with a tap, which was produced in Europe in the early 1700s—not the *bul’otki*—as the predecessor of the samovar.³⁷

³⁶ L.V. Britenkova, N.V. Grigor’eva, S.P. Kalinichev (sost.), V.I. Grishetskii (red.), *Samovary Rossii*, M., 2009, p.118.

³⁷ R.E.F. Smith and David Christian, *op. cit.*, pp. 242-243.



**Photo 3. Kettle by Paul de Lamerie, 1730.
The Victoria & Albert Museum.**

Source of photo: *Naturalistic Spoon, Rococo to Art Nouveau*,
http://naturalisticspoon.com/Paul_De_Lamerie.html

Very similar to the European-style hot-water heater, the main section of the samovar manufactured in the Urals in the 1760s was spherical and equipped with a tap (see Photo 4).



Самовары. Завод Демидовых. Урал. 1760-е гг.

Photo 1. Samovars manufactured at the Demidov's Ural plant in the 1760s.

Source of photo: L.V. Britenkova, N.V. Grigor'eva, S.P. Kalinichev (sost.), and V.I. Grishetskii (red.),
Samovary Rossii. M., 2009, p.122.

While it is thought that the unique shape of Russian samovars came about in the 1770s, some believe that this shape had been invented in Europe prior to that. The first samovar factory in Russia was not in the Urals but in the traditional gunmaking town of Tula; it opened in 1778.³⁸ In any case,

³⁸ R.E.F. Smith and David Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

it was rare to find this type of hot-water heater in the average household, as such samovars were found in the homes of only the nobility and the wealthy.



Photo 5. Samovar in the early 19th century, manufactured in Tula.

Source of photo: *Samovarnaya Masterskaya Alekseya Prozorovskogo*, <http://www.kiev-samovar.com/samovar-vaza-tula-nachalo-xix-veka/>

It was around the mid-19th century that this gradually started to change. Once the wealthy started drinking tea, they also started requesting it wherever they traveled. This sometimes presented a problem. For example, Yamskaia Sloboda, then a Russian post town where horses could be changed, did not exactly have taverns and inns everywhere, and it was some 18–25 verst (approximately 18–25 km) between relay stations. Tea lovers started carrying simple samovars for use while traveling.³⁹ The most frequent travelers at the time were noble landowners and members of the merchant class; these were the people out buying tea in different parts of Russia. The formation of a distribution network that reached all parts of the Russian Empire from the latter part of the 18th to the 19th century spurred merchants to take business trips. At the same time, the popularization of tea also involved farmers along the way. In the 1840s, Custine witnessed the widespread adoption of samovars by the peasant class, placing its initial adoption even earlier than the French invasion of Moscow in 1812.⁴⁰ Subbotin states that, in Russia, samovars spread even sooner than tea itself. In his trip to Russia in 1843, German economist Baron Haxthausen (1792–1866), who introduced rural communities in Russia to Europe through his writing, noted that tea was spreading along major roadways and was increasingly becoming the drink of choice for steadfast farmers.⁴¹

Although samovars had not necessarily reached farmers in frontier areas, it is interesting that samovars began to become intertwined with the lives of farmers from early in the 19th century. Many peasants had started to move to cities to become craftsmen following the Great Reforms, and upon arriving in Moscow they passed taverns and cafeterias that served tea just as they liked to drink it. The method of drinking tea preferred by Russian peasants is unrelated to the quality of the tea; it is, instead, the preference of peasants focused on being served strong tea and being treated with respect as a customer.⁴² Through the increased production and improvement of samovars, farmers at the end of the 19th century came to drink tea every day, a pastime which blended into the landscape of daily

³⁹ L.V. Britenkova, N.V. Grigor'eva, S.P. Kalinichev (sost.), V.I. Grishetskii (red.), *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39.

⁴⁰ I.A. Sokolov, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35.

⁴¹ A.P. Subbotin, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

⁴² E.A. Tonchu, T.A. Fedoseeva, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

life. According to Russian painters, who experienced a period of attention in the latter part of the 19th century, scenes with samovars were a major motif for conveying the country's folk identity and national culture.

5.3. *Koporskii chai*—Cheap herbal tea substituted for real Chinese tea

Kyakhta trade in the 18th century focused on the export of furs from Russia to China, but in the 19th century, it became primarily based on the import of tea from China to Russia. Moreover, the barter trade system in Kyakhta continued through 1853 and that economic situation encouraged the development of the Russian textile industry. However, various other factors also impeded the development of Kyakhta trade. The first factor was the smuggling of cheap Canton tea by sea routes, and the second was the wide spread of “counterfeit tea.”

It is possible to produce counterfeit tea that is very similar to real tea by rolling and drying leaves of the Kiprei plant (*Epilobium*), an herb of European Russia. This herbal tea is known by various names, including “Koporskii chai” and “Ivan chai (Ivan tea),” and spread as a type of replacement tea in rural areas. Kiprei grows naturally in rural areas and is very easy to obtain. This fake tea problem began in the 1820s and is often mentioned in administrative documents. This fake tea spread due to the high price of tea that resulted from high tariffs and high transport cost on the land route through Siberia. Under the Regulation of 1800, the legal tariffs on tea were determined and then additional tariffs were imposed. In the case of leaf tea, a tariff of 47-75 kopecks per funt was imposed on green tea and 60 kopecks per funt on black tea. These tariffs continued until 1841. In contrast with leaf tea, imported brick tea was thought to be low-grade tea and a tariff of about 6 kopeck per funt was imposed.⁴³

In the early period, European Russian merchants bought mainly green and black leaf tea, and Siberian merchants bought brick tea because of the difference in the level of tariffs. Significant capital was required to buy tea in Kyakhta and small-scale merchants could hardly participate in the tea trade. Because of these conditions, in 1826, the Russian government decided to return collected import taxes to merchants who reexported Chinese tea via Kyakhta to Leipzig, Hamburg and Amsterdam. Because of this system, Kyakhta tea could compete with Canton tea transported by British ships.⁴⁴

As mentioned above, tea was too expensive for the lower classes in Imperial Russia. However, it is likely that the Russian lower class (farmers, poor city residents, and so on) actually preferred real tea to the cheaper herbal alternatives. In order to solve this question, I found the following information from materials in the Russian State Historical Archive in St. Petersburg.

A notification to the Department of Manufacturing and Trade in the Ministry of Finance on April 11, 1845, mentions the establishment of a committee to investigate the “corruption” of tea and the members of the committee were selected from the directors of the Russian American Company and representatives of Kyakhta merchants.⁴⁵ Both the Russian American Company and Kyakhta merchants were closely related to the interests of the tea trade and there was often smuggling and forgery of tea that hurt their businesses. Exposing this problem was a very urgent issue for them.

After this notification, a report from a St. Petersburg official to the Minister of Finance (F.P. Bronchenko) on May 23, 1845, mentions in detail that they found counterfeit tea, that farmers in rural areas produce them extensively, that the municipality continues to investigate in St. Petersburg, Tver', Moscow, and Vladimir provinces, and that people have been observed smuggling tea by both

⁴³ N.K.Krit, *Materialy dlia obsuzhdeniya voprosov chainoi torgovli*, SPb., 1864, pp.2, 4.

⁴⁴ A.P. Subbotin, *Chai i chainaya torgovlya v Rossii i drugikh gosudarstvakh, Proizvodstvo, potreblenie Chaya*, SPb., 1892, p. 461.

⁴⁵ RGIA, F. 18, Op. 5, D. 695, L. 1, 8.

land and sea routes (that is, through Finland or the Baltic sea) due to the high price of tea.

A report from the Minister of Internal Affairs (L.A. Perovskii) to the Minister of Finance on May 29, 1845, mentions that counterfeit tea was found in five shops in Nizhnii Novgorod and points out that there is more clever forgery there than in other regions. Another report from the Minister of Internal Affairs to the Minister of Finance on June 20, 1845, notes that counterfeit tea was found in Kazan' and that it spread about 85 verst (85 km) from Kazan' along the trans-Siberian road, and surprisingly, a factory of counterfeit tea was found in a Tatar village⁴⁶. They had not succeeded in discovering counterfeit tea factories in previous investigations. There is very little research on the history of tea among the Tatars, but in the Kyakhta custom records through 1829, there are names of wholesalers from Kazan' and we can acknowledge the proper relation between Tatars and tea.⁴⁷ From this widespread of production of counterfeit tea, not only by the Russian population but also by the Tatar population such as in Kazan', it is possible to estimate that demand (or desire) for tea has greatly increased. The series of reports above indicate that counterfeit tea production became a lucrative and large industry that catered to the modest household budgets of rural farmers. However, counterfeit tea production using kiprei is a more honest way to provide an alternative to real tea (assuming it is labeled as koporskii or ivan chai). In the worst cases, forgers dyed weak or used tea to disguise it as new tea, or mixed real tea with counterfeit tea in a way that was undetectable to buyers.

We should note that the counterfeit tea problem started around the 1820s. That is, more than 20 years passed until the establishment of an investigation committee in 1845. However, this investigation was very difficult, as it involved such things as investigating the smuggling of Cantonese tea. Further, it must be remembered that the Russian people began to drink tea not just as a medicinal remedy, but as an everyday beverage several times per day starting in the 1840s.⁴⁸ We can surmise that the spread of counterfeit tea resulted from both the increasing demand for tea and the desire of the Russian lower class for "real tea" but who were forced to buy cheap smuggled tea or alternate forms of tea.

On March 16, 1850, the Ministry of Finance submitted a measure to prevent counterfeit tea that was enacted. This measure strictly set the punishment for this crime, and entrusted its enforcement with city police and trade representatives appointed from the members of Russian American Company and Kyakhta merchants.⁴⁹ We suspect that this measure had some effect on counterfeit and smuggled tea, but the crisis of Kyakhta trade in 1853 made this problem even more urgent.

5.4. Permission to import tea by sea route and increasing tea consumption

The Taiping Rebellion (1851-64) in China seriously damaged Kyakhta trade. In 1853, the import of tea to Kyakhta decreased drastically, and then the ordering of Russian products stopped. This occurred because the rebel army restricted tea transport routes in China. The Russian government finally acknowledged the disastrous situation in Kyakhta on August 6, 1854, when it issued an imperial decree permitting the government to pay for one-third of the cost of a manufactured product or one-half of the cost of furs using silverware, and allowing the export of silver and gold to China via Kyakhta.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ RGIA, F. 18, Op. 5, D. 695, L. 27-ob., 31-ob., 33-ob.

⁴⁷ RGADA, F. 183, Op.1, D. 82A, L. 8-11.

⁴⁸ A.P. Subbotin, *op. cit.*, p. 192; I.A. Sokolov, A.A. Nazukina, *Chai i vodka v russkom bytu vtoroi poloviny XIX-nachala XX veka*, M., 2008, pp. 36-37.

⁴⁹ RGIA, F. 1152, Op. 4, D. 81, L. 2-88.

⁵⁰ RGIA, F. 1265, Op. 3, D. 107, L. 2.

In 1858, eight ports in China were opened on the basis of Tianjin Treaty and Russia obtained Primorye. By this political change in the Far East, sea trade became a reality for Russia. Because of this advance, restrictions on Kyakhta trade were eliminated and the Kyakhta customhouse was moved to Irkutsk. In the regulations issued on March 3 and April 1 of 1861, it was permitted to import tea by sea routes from western borders of Imperial Russia and all European ports.⁵¹ However, in order to protect the interests of Kyakhta traders, high tariffs were imposed for tea transported by sea. In spite of such restrictions, permission to import by sea increased the amount of imported tea enormously. (See Figure 3). One reason for this increase is that smuggled tea emerged in official statistics as it entered the country through legal channels. However, it is hard to find correct records in this period. We must also take into account that official data in published books is just one limited measure of all trade that was occurring. However, the increase in tea imports in the 1870s definitely can be attributed to the opening of the port of Odessa for tea trade. Many Moscow merchants opened their agent offices in Odessa and tea trade there flourished. The supply of tea in Imperial Russia increased drastically and tea drinking customs began to spread to the lower stratum of the working class after the 1860s.⁵²

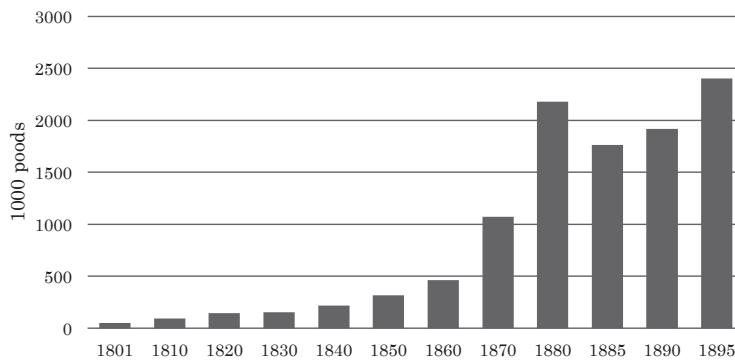


Figure 3. Import of tea to Imperial Russia

Source: S.T. Gulishambarov, *Vsemirnaya trgovlya v XIX v i uchastie v nei Rossii*, SPb., 1898, p.36.

The popularity of tea drinking among the Russian working class was already on the rise by the mid-19th century. The thriving Nizhny Novgorod Fair was a large tea trading center in the Russian Empire, second only to Moscow, and had an area called Chinatown (although Chinese merchants did not live there) designed and built by French architects in the early 1800s. People with the ability to discern between different types of tea were hired to work the fair. Nizhny Novgorod Fair's general information booklet, published in 1867, contained the following description:⁵³

The tea business takes place not here [Siberian Wharf] but on a street block of stone. It is here only that people come to scope out and sample the tea. There, tea faktury are trusted. Each tea broker has a document written out with the weight, type and value of each box of tea entrusted to him from the tea's owner. In business terminology, this document is called a faktury.

⁵¹ *Kratkii ocherk vozniknoveniya, razvitiya i tepereshnyago sostoyania nashikh torgovykh s Kitaem snoshenii cherez Kyakhtu*. M., Izdanie kyakhtinskogo kupechestva, 1896, pp. 67-68.

⁵² A.P. Subbotin, *op.cit.*, p. 193.

⁵³ N.N. Ovsiiannikov, *O torgovle Nizhegorodskoi iarmarke*, Nizhnii Novgorod, 1867, p.30-31.

Merchants buying tea use this *fakury* to select teas as they like. If one does not have a *fakury* with these details on pre-prepared boxes of tea, the buyer—for example, a merchant from Moscow—has to run around to find the teas that they want. Buyers know grades of tea, so they cannot be deceived when buying them. Other boxes of tea are completely unopened.

Many merchants hire a special salesclerk so as to know the value of the tea. A number of these have been in this business for 20 years or longer, accumulating a surprising level of proficiency. They are always surrounded by cups of tea and are equipped with the ability to distinguish the exact value of different grades of tea. This is the most important task because Kyakhta merchants themselves have been known to mistake their own grades of tea and set higher prices on less expensive teas. In addition, tea preferences in Moscow differ slightly from those in Siberia. Salesclerks who know grades of tea well can make 3,000–4,000 silver rubles per year...

In this way, tea arranged and purchased in Nizhny Novgorod was branded and distributed to stores in Moscow for retail sale. In addition, we cannot underestimate the fact that the main people who traded tea in Odessa were also Moscow merchants who mastered how to trade tea in Nizhny Novgorod Fair. As the distribution of tea became organized, it was in the 1870's that tea came to replace alcohol as the drink of choice among laborers.⁵⁴ By this time, tea drinking was recognized as a part of traditional Russian culture.



Picture 1. V.M. Vasnetsov, *Drinking tea in a Tavern* (1874)

In this picture, we can see a boy serving tea in a tavern. Workers drink tea from saucers.

⁵⁴ R.E.F. Smith and David Christian, *op. cit.*, pp.236-237.

Conclusion

The popularization of tea in Russia followed a different course from that in Europe. Russia, connected to China by land, learned of tea from the Mongolians and Chinese. However, before adopting tea-drinking customs, Russians passed through another stage of adoption, which exposed them to tea drinking trends found mainly in Western Europe. Neither the Dutch nor the English adopted Asian-style tea culture, but rather adapted it by improving upon teaware and devising a different method of drinking tea, including the addition of milk and sugar. Russians, although they learned how Europeans drank tea, followed a different path from Europe in how tea drinking became a part of social life. This is because Russian tea drinking was not a custom associated with discussions and gatherings in public spaces, but rather was enjoyed with one's family or as a means for facilitating business by Russian merchants. Initially, Russians learned how to drink brick tea, but did not adopt it as a custom in the 18th century. However, demand for brick tea, which had previously been ignored by Russians as merely the preferred tea of indigenous Siberians, began to rise in the early 19th century and it gained in popularity until Russians themselves came to drink it.⁵⁵ In this way, Russians not only developed a taste for tea that was closely related to lifestyle, but also tea was transformed into an important product. Its trade was linked to diplomacy and economic relations with China, and this process fostered the partial adoption of Asian tea-drinking customs.

This paper suggests that it is possible to explain various previously neglected issues by reviewing the sociocultural historical aspects of Russian tea drinking and by examining the practices of tea merchants and the state of the tea trade in specific regions, such as at the Nizhny Novgorod Fair.

⁵⁵ I.A. Sokolov, *op. cit.*, p. 34.