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A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE RUSSIAN TEA HERITAGE

Abstract. A Russian author M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin once said: “What a poor choice of beverage tea is! Although, if not for the Chinese who gave it to us, a great turmoil would have occurred!” During its long history course, tea has become popular among various continents, taking firm positions in their cultures, economies and historical traditions. Russia, as well as many other countries, was not left behind the worldwide tea expansion: its people had learned to admire tea on such a high level that later on it reached the vital product status.

Long before the tradition of drinking different varieties of tea settled in Russia, people who used to live on its territory had been drinking tea made out of berries and herbs. Such tea may comprise strawberry, raspberry and so on [3: 247]. In terms of taste qualities and color palettes, it can be considered the same as the premium sorts of tea. Even though they might not include the well-known tea ingredients, for instance, caffeine, they remain delicious and nutritious nonetheless. It would be justified to mention another Russian drink that shares similarities with tea, and that is called sbiten. Sbiten is an old beverage that is commonly prepared in vessels; during its cooking process various ingredients can be used, water and honey being essential amongst them, and a wide choice of spices according to one’s preferences [3: 233]. Definitely, sbiten is not the same as tea in its general sense, but the Russian people used it for the same purposes, as herb- and berry-based tea – to satisfy thirst and to warm oneself.

Tea plant was brought to Russia first-hand from Asia. It was first mentioned by Cossack atamans in 1567 after they had returned from China: they referred to it as “unheard of throughout the entire Rus”, even though by that time it was already spread in South-East Siberia and Middle Asia. Only in 1638 would tea would end up in the Tsar’s Household. One of the Russia’s ambassadors brought it from the Mongol khan who exchanged it for sable fur. At first, the Tsar did not appreciate tea, however, it was stated, and “it puts the desire to sleep during church services and tiresome council work away”. In addition, there was a rumor that “it purifies blood”. With time, tea supplies were being depleted; only in 1679, the first treaty

between Russia and China considering tea trade was signed [2: 190]. It was because of the following factors why public did not accept tea:

- the long distance between Russia and China that caused tea's price to go high;
- the long-standing drinks, like kvass and vodka, had already been in use for quite some time making it hard for tea to appeal to ordinary people;
- tea's foreign origin;
- the need to have condiments (sugar, honey) and special equipment (tea-cups, teapots).

Overall, Russian historical, cultural and economic backgrounds did not create a proper build-up for tea to become widespread among the masses [3: 23].

During Catherine the Great's reign tea trade was developed further making tea more available. A wholesale fair was opened in the town of Kyakhta, where different items were traded in a form of exchange transactions. Chinese merchants were able to trade tea in exchange for fur, leather, metal manufactures, and linen fabric and so on. Later on, tea would be transferred to Irbit fair – one of the largest Russian fairs at the time – and Moscow. From the capital city tea got distributed to other parts of Russia and sold along with ordinary goods. Such system of tea trade and tea transfer gradually expanded the targeted consumer field [2: 191]. On top of that, increased tea supplying triggered West Siberia's economic growth: local post office was established, some of the former villages were turned into towns [1: 20]. Regarding tea is civilizing impact, it could be said about the decrease in alcoholism among regions where there was more tea as opposed to alcohol beverages [4: 27].

For the majority of time Chinese tea remained the most popular in Russia. Despite the formal monopoly of Chinese tea on the Russian market, certain attempts to reproduce Russian tea plants were made, the first one taking place in Georgia in 1830. Local enthusiasts were successful in their endeavor, although the Georgia-produced tea did not get too much recognition for there was no government initiative; it was sold locally by the name of "Russian tea" without getting spread around the entire country [4: 335]. Moreover, certain sorts of tea were acclimatized in Azerbaijan and Solokhau (modern Krasnodar Krai).

After the Bolshevik party had taken charge of the country in 1917, alcohol production and consumption – especially concerning vodka – were prohibited on national level. To compensate that, the military force and

manufacturing facilities were being supplied with free tea. This helped Bolsheviks win in the upcoming Civil war (1917–1922): unlike the White movement that had unlimited supplies of alcohol in disposal and used it as a means of mobilizing troops, the Red Army proved to be better in terms of morale. This was taken in account by the ruling party during the period of 1920's, 1930's and the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945). All these years the Soviet Union in its entirety was being supplied with cheap yet high quality, generally accessible tea produced on the territory of USSR and imported from China – and, judging by the experience of the past, this had its positive influence. In spite of the efforts to produce tea on national level, the USSR did not reach absolute independence from importing tea: the reason for that was the lack of land with suitable climate to cultivate enough plants. Apart from that, the older generation of the Soviet Union people grew up drinking premium-quality Chinese tea, so their taste could not be satisfied with just locally produced tea [3: 31].

Chinese tea had been imported until Leonid Brezhnev became the general secretary of the Soviet Union: The Era of Stagnation caused bad influence on several economic branches including tea production and import. During that time Chinese tea plants were getting swapped with plants from India, Ceylon, Indonesia, Africa and Turkey; all of them were lower in quality than China-produced tea [3: 32]. Despite this broadening the range of tea tastes of the Soviet people, it also meant the decrease in quality of imported tea, even though tea quality used to be controlled on state level. Following that, national tea production suffered fatal crash, the prices came up, and tea falsification became an ordinary phenomenon. The Era of Stagnation, as well as Perestroika and the 90's period affected collective consciousness of the Soviet people in an unhealthy way. In a country that had the authority of the world-leader tea-importer and the third global tea-producer tea was not just an ordinary drink. It was a national symbol meaning that radical changes considering nation's symbol could bring an anxious feeling to everyone's minds [3: 33].

It cannot be said that the quality of imported tea has increased during the recent years. This problem is not advocated by government the same way it used to be during the Soviet period – nowadays importing tea is in hands of entrepreneurial businesses. They purchase tea from reseller firms that do not guarantee their plants to be of high quality, unlike plantation owners. It can be explained by the entrepreneurs' high-income ambitions,

not the enthusiasm to provide quality tea. People tend to stop drinking tea at all [3: 35].

In this relation, William Pokhlyobkin, a historiographer and a culinary specialist, expresses a valid point: “Only the indifference and pantophagy liquidation... only the awareness education considering this topic... combined with patriotic attitude may correct both economic and moral standpoints of this problem.” [3: 37–38] Indeed, in this day and age, when tea-drinking as a Russian tradition suffers decadence, it is of utter importance to reanimate it and preserve for the future generations.

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