

Jussi Wacklin
Department of History
University of Helsinki
jussi.wacklin@helsinki.fi

Drinking and Public Space in Leningrad/St. Petersburg and Helsinki in the Interwar Period

1. Introduction

Both Leningrad and Helsinki were growing rapidly in the interwar period – thousands of migrants were coming into cities to work in the new industries and services.¹ Alienation, fragmentation, and weakening of kinship ties are features, which are often used to describe what it means to an individual to live in a modern urban environment in this situation. Still, there is another side of urban living, the creation of communities, the need to socialise, meet friends – and simply, have fun. Here public drinking facilities have had an important role – drink was included closely to the public life in the pre-modern agrarian and urban society, and this tradition had a strong continuity into the modern times.² Taverns were not only selling drinks, but also space for socialising and meeting people, i.e. it is these urban services, like taverns, which create much of the regularly used urban public space, albeit commercial, instrumental, and for paid leisure (public access, but privately controlled).

There has been an increasing spatial segregation of activities and services in a modern city. When in the pre-modern city the street as well as tavern were venues for a wide range of activities from business and politics to drinking and games, in the modern city most of these activities have their own, often purpose built spaces. Many of those activities that frequented the public areas of the pre-industrial city have in the modern city also been controlled by the authorities or simply declared illegal. Great hopes were directed to urban planning, the creation of efficient, clean, and orderly city. In the Soviet Union as well as in Finland town planning was seen as one of the great transformers of the new way of life. Still, for many the early 20th century urban environment meant weak housing conditions in densely populated areas. In these conditions streets and taverns had still great importance as a space for traditional leisure and drinking. The contemporary

¹ The population of Helsinki grew from c. 160 000 in 1920 to 258 000 in 1939. St.Petersburg/Leningrad had 2.5 million inhabitants in 1917, 700 000 in 1920 and c. 3 million in the end of the 1930s.

² See Thomas Brennan, *Public Drinking and Popular Culture in Eighteen-Century Paris* (Princeton, 1988); Peter Clark, *The English Alehouse. A Social History 1200-1830*, (London, 1983); Beat Kümin and B. Ann Tlustý (eds.), *The World of Tavern. Public Houses in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot, 2002).

commentators, who mostly denounced public drinking facilities as a cause of disorder, rarely acknowledged this aspect. The most dubious urban public spaces in this respect were working class beer halls and taverns, which provided space not only for drinking but also for gambling, music and dancing. The authorities in both cities controlled or closed these places, which had significant outcomes on the availability of commercial public spaces in the cities. Strong control of drinking was naturally only one part of the strong state intervention to regulate urban spaces in both cities, but it might be one of the factors contributing to the relative scarcity of urban services and to the weakness of “urbanism” and “diversity” in these cities as Ivan Szelenyi and Timo Cantell have argued.³

It is important to note that drinking is a culturally defined action – the same drinking activities can be regarded as acceptable or unacceptable in different times and places.⁴ Alcohol’s destructive and harmful side is clear and it has also been acknowledged from the early times by the authorities: the state has intervened to regulate and control public drinking, affecting its format. Nevertheless, drinking is handled here more as a part of sociability than as an addiction. During the period being studied the state was exceptionally heavily involved in controlling public drinking both in Leningrad and Helsinki; it simultaneously monopolised and regulated the alcohol trade, and condemned drunkenness. Different ideological, political and economical systems in Helsinki and Leningrad make comparison complex, but it also offers a chance see how the different institutional and political changes affected drinking cultures in the cities. My major concern here is in the impact of alcohol control methods to public drinking and to uses of public spaces in the two cities in a time of rapid urbanisation and social change. The stress is on taverns and other public drinking facilities.

2. Taverns, control, and public space

Public drinking has aroused long lasting debates in St. Petersburg/Leningrad and Helsinki since the 19th century. Taverns, pubs, restaurants but also streets and parks as well as work places in the city have been the main arenas of public drinking. In the beginning of the studied period there was a growing gap in the conceptions of acceptability of drinking between the authorities and large part of

³ Ivan Szelenyi, ‘Cities under Socialism – and After’, Andrusz, Harloem, Szelenyi (eds.), *Cities after Socialism. Urban and Regional Change and Conflict in Post-Socialist Societies* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 299-300; Timo Cantell, *Helsinki and a Vision of Place* (Helsinki, 1999), p. 87.

⁴ For anthropological view on drinking, see David G. Mandelbaum, Alcohol and Culture in Mac Marshall (ed.), *Beliefs, Behaviours & Alcoholic beverages. A Cross-Cultural Survey*. The University of Michigan Press (Ann Arbor, 1979).

the urban population in both countries. “Irrational” or even harmful ways of spending time by drinking fitted poorly to the picture of the new modernising economy and to the ideologies of the new states; they preferred organised leisure for their citizens. There were many parallels in the ways of drinking in Finland and Russia in the beginning of the period as well as in the authorities’ attitude on drinking. In both cities strong liquor was the main drink, and there was an emphasis on intoxication. Drinking had a seasonal character and was especially in Russia connected with religious holidays.⁵ Alcohol was not part of daily life, but a way to get a break from it. Drinking habits were usually regarded as “uncivilised” and “backward” and drinking as a problem, which had to be controlled by the state.

The development of Soviet alcohol politics followed closely general political changes in the country. The period of war communism (1918-1921) had strict prohibition, but with the end of radical war communism and start of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921 alcohol politics were liberalised step by step. This happened mostly because of financial reasons and because of the difficulties in implementation of the prohibition. Alcohol trade was very profitable, and the Soviet state needed urgently capital. Finally, in August 1925, the state’s alcohol monopoly was officially declared and at the same time the sale of 40% vodka was launched. Stalin himself admitted the complexity of the situation, but argued that the income from alcohol sales was needed to finance the industrialization of the country without depending on foreign capital. From the First Five Year-plan Stalin’s alcohol politics combined relatively liberal retail trade with strict police control of public drunkenness⁶. The eccentricity of the Soviet drink trade in the interwar period was therefore in the fact that while the state was promoting the production and sale of vodka, it at the same time tried to marginalize public drinking.

Finland had a prohibition of alcohol 1919-1932. The law faced same problems as in the Soviet Union or United States, and had mostly counter-productive results. After the end of the prohibition the alcohol trade was by no means free. The state alcohol company (ALKO) had a monopoly in retail trade, but restaurants got a right to sell alcohol after a rather complicated licensing procedure. Drinking facilities were divided into three price groups; first class restaurants for the upper classes,

⁵ See Patricia Herlihy, ‘Joy of Rus’: Rites and Rituals of Russian Drinking’ *The Russian Review*, vol 50, 1991; Satu Apo, *Viinan voima. Näkökulmia suomalaisten kansanomaiseen alkoholiajatteluun ja -kulttuuriin* (Helsinki, 2001).

⁶ I. R. Takala, *Veselié Rusi. Istoria alkogolnoi problemy v Rossii* (Sankt-Peterburg, 2002), p. 202. Paul Hagenloh, ‘“Socially harmful elements” and the Great Terror’, Sheila Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Stalinism. New Directions* (New York, 2000), pp. 286-303.

second for the middle class and the third for lower groups. Facilities were also divided according to the types of alcohol they had licence to sell.⁷

How did political changes affect public drinking? In St. Petersburg taverns had had a prominent place in workers' free time before the revolution and although the prohibition and civil war hindered their functions for several years, they nevertheless started to regain their position as a venue of public drinking in the beginning of the NEP-period. Other commercial urban services were redeveloped too: Richard Stites describes Nevsky prospect in the mid 1920s as "a vivid insult to socialism" with its private stalls, cafes, restaurants, and even casinos.⁸ The temperance law had nevertheless caused some lasting changes to public drinking: even at the highest point of the NEP-period the number of beer halls never got even close to the figures before the First World War (1663 in 1914). The number of beer halls mentioned in the Leningrad city directory is following⁹:

	Beer halls
1923	99
1925	253
1926	359
1929	271
1930	263
1931	206
1935	104

When alcohol politics were liberalised, beer halls started to open up, but the anti-alcohol campaign and the beginning of the First Five Year plan in the late 1920s started to diminish their numbers again. Authorities had tried to make taverns and restaurants less tempting by for example prohibiting playing billiards and denouncing foxtrot and tango as bourgeois dances.¹⁰ In the end of the NEP-period private ownership of the taverns was eliminated - according to the city directories most alcohol outlets were managed by the state companies or co-operatives (LSPO, Gosspirit), which also owned the breweries and liquor factories. This made drinking places more standardised.¹¹ Even publicly owned beer halls were still considered to be remnants of the past: drunkenness, foul language and fights filled the newspaper reports about tavern-life. Local authorities were closing down beer halls due to disturbances and crime associated with them or

⁷ Merja Sillanpää, *Säännöstelty huvi. Suomalainen ravintola 1900-luvulla* (Helsinki, 2002), p. 65.

⁸ Stites, Richard, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900*. (Cambridge, 1992), p. 61.

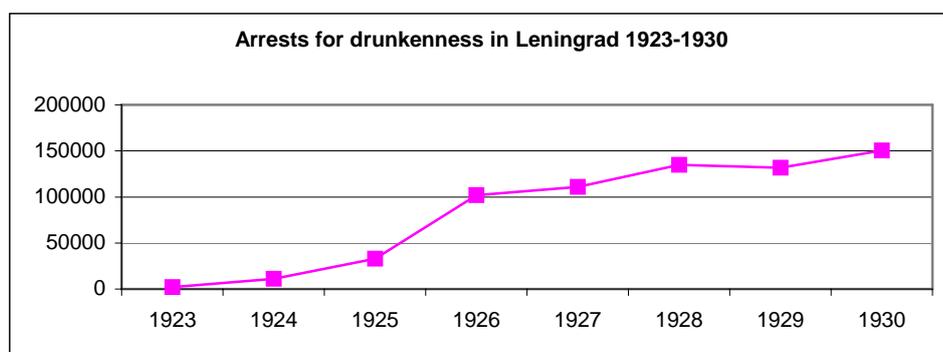
⁹ *Ves Petrograd 1923; Ves Leningrad 1925-1935. Adresnaia i spravochnaia kniga g. Petrograda/Leningrada*. Figure for 1914 from Phillips, *Bolsheviks and the Bottle*, p. 85.

¹⁰ Laura L. Phillips, *Bolsheviks and the Bottle. Drink and Worker Culture in St. Petersburg, 1900-1929* (DeKalb, 2000), p. 91. Anne E. Gorsuch, *Youth in revolutionary Russia. Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Bloomington, 2000), p. 121.

¹¹ *Ves Leningrad 1925-1935*. Taverns did not have individual names in the city directory anymore. They were neither called with traditional names *kabak* (tavern) or *traktyr* (inn), but *pivnaia* (beer hall) or *stolovaia* (canteen).

because of “sanitary reasons”.¹² The limited number of beer halls meant growing distance to them from the working place and crowded conditions on payday. The tavern also lost some of its earlier functions, for example as a place to find work opportunities. Still, the exclusion of “respectable” women from the beer halls had a strong continuity. According to L. Phillips, the absence of a female presence allowed men “an unfettered opportunity to exhibit masculine behaviours” in taverns. Despite the changes in women’s position after the revolution, women had still limited opportunities for socially acceptable drinking.¹³

The number and accessibility of public drinking facilities remained low after a short renaissance in the NEP-period, but alcohol was rather easily available at the stores. This caused pressure to find alternative venues for drinking. Along with private premises alcohol was increasingly consumed at open city spaces, as the rocketing figures for arrests for drunkenness show.¹⁴



The authorities planned to create attractive, and more easily observable alternatives, which would take over the tavern’s role and functions as a venue for workers’ free time. The most popular alternative was the workers’ club, which was promoted as a sober centre of the new way of life. Although these clubs did provide new space for spending free time, especially for women, they soon inherited some functions of the old taverns: male workers transformed the club into a tavern. In 1925 it became legal to sell vodka by glass in clubs, theatres, and at other public events and soon also card games and billiards, the normal functions of a pre-revolutionary tavern, resurfaced in clubs.¹⁵ There were also reports about canteens (*stolovaia*) turning in to drinking places in the mid 1920s. While workers were still drinking at home and beer halls, they were now also drinking

¹² For example *Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Sankt-Peterburga (TsGA SPb)*, f. 33, op. 3, d. 195, l. 8. *Krasnaia gazeta, vechernyi Vypusk*, 17 May 1925, 28 September 1925, 12 September 1925, 14 September 1925, 19 September 1925, 2 October 1925, 18 November 1925, 7 December 1925. *Krasnaia gazeta*, 24 October 1925, 5 March 1927.

¹³ Phillips, *Bolsheviks and the Bottle*, p. 78, 118-119.

¹⁴ B. F. Didrikhson, *Alkogolizm i proizvoditel’nost truda* (Leningrad, 1931), pp. 59-60, *Trezvost’ i kul’tura*, no 11, 1929 p. 5.

¹⁵ Phillips, *Bolsheviks and the Bottle*, pp. 87-89, *Krasnaia gazeta, vechernyi vypusk*, 28 September 1925. *Krasnaia gazeta*, 2 September 1923, 10 October 1925, 10 October 1926. *Trezvost’ i kul’tura*, No. 2, 1928, pp. 8-9. No. 23, 1929, p. 13.

collectively in “an organised manner” during festivities and holidays, sometimes with the permission and even help of the labour union organs.¹⁶ The growth of public drinking was still troubling party circles despite Stalin’s capital-raising plans. In March 1927 Sovnarkom passed legislation, which prohibited again liquor sales in workers’ clubs, theatres and cinemas¹⁷. The next year a Society for Battle Against Alcoholism (OBSA) started its anti-alcohol work and launched campaigns against public drinking facilities. It managed to close 27 beer halls and 10 liquor stores in Leningrad till the end of 1928 mainly nearby the factories, but as the society’s own paper admitted, the use of administrative measures did not have expected results: “overcrowded trams drive from “non-alcohol” areas to the “drunken centre” straight after work”.¹⁸ At the same time OBSA promoted strongly clubs, “cultured tea-houses” and other non-alcoholic activities. Still, while the campaign certainly had some effect on club work, some clubs were still working as “beer hall branches”.¹⁹ Beer halls were indeed “easy to close, but difficult to replace”.²⁰

Another great change in the use and availability of public drinking facilities came with the rationing period in 1930-1935, which affected the whole urban economy. As Elena Osokina has shown, the speciality of the Soviet state supply system was the increasing hierarchy of distribution of goods to different groups of the population. In the rationing system each group of consumers could buy commodities only from their own “closed distributors” (ZRK), to which they could enter only after showing certain documents about, for example, membership of a party organisation, place of work etc. Public eateries also reflected the hierarchy of state supply. The main principle was that the party elite, officers, intellectual elite and other privileged groups had their own “closed” restaurants reserved for them. Workers of heavy industry and other key areas of the economy, who were estimated to be useful for the state, had also their own canteens and norms. Disenfranchised groups, which did not receive ration cards, were denied access to public dining halls, the only exception being the so-called “commercial” facilities. This did not mean that they were privately owned, but that access to them depended only on one’s financial capabilities.²¹ When most beer halls were “commercial” it was possible to go to them with a group of people coming from different levels of the hierarchy. Still, in the first half of the 1930s these “open” facilities were facing great difficulties and closed distributors became the main source of food and

¹⁶ Spravka Informatsionogo otdela TsK RKP(b) I. V. Stalinu. 1925 g. (printed in *Istoricheskii Arkhiv*, No. 1, 2001), pp. 8-9. *Krasnaia gazeta*, vechnyi vypusk, 3 May 1925, 1 July 1925, 24 October 1925.

¹⁷ *Trezvost' i kul'tura*. No 1, 1928, p. 2.

¹⁸ *Trezvost' i kul'tura*, No 1, 1929, p. 1

¹⁹ *Trezvost' i kul'tura*, No 23, 1929, p. 13.

²⁰ *Trezvost' i kul'tura*, No 3, 1928, p. 2.

²¹ Elena Osokina, *Our daily bread. Socialist Distribution and the Art of Survival in Stalin's Russia, 1927-1941* (New York, 2001), pp. 78-81.

drink.²² Lengosnarpit, which was responsible for most of the communal dining in the Leningrad, had over two thousand canteens, cafeterias, buffets etc. in 1934, but only 87 belonged to the commercial “open” category. Even those were on the brink of closure and could not fulfil their plans.²³ The relatively low price of vodka bought from the stores made it still accessible for many and after the removal of the rationing system in 1935 “open” public facilities became again more accessible.²⁴ Still, the access to many spaces and products was attached to one’s position in the state hierarchy – and there was little choice to be made between drinking places.

In Finland the official attitude towards public drinking and even eating facilities was also complex – the Ministry of Trade’s committee for the development of restaurant and hotel sector in 1921 offers a good example; it argued in its report to the parliament that “spending time in restaurants and cafés is likely to produce squandering and idleness, which is harmful to the healthy development of society”. According to the committee many restaurants and cafés were places for illegal alcohol trade, nests of immorality and gambling. Still, in the material, which the committee got from the police authorities around the country, most police chiefs stated that they had no problems with cafés and restaurants. The committee was nevertheless eager to cite the most sinister description of restaurant life by the police chief of Vyborg, and was recommending further control and restraints for the sector.²⁵ During the prohibition illegal alcohol was indeed relatively easily available in restaurants, but it seems that most of the drinking happened in private premises.²⁶ After the prohibition ended in 1932 there was a modest number of licensed drinking facilities in Helsinki, (full rights given mostly for upper class restaurants)²⁷

²² Leningradskii oblastnoi gosudarsvennyi arkhiv v gorode Vyborg (LOGAV), f, R-3395, op 1, d. 3, l. 9. R-3455, op 2, d. 71, l. 5.

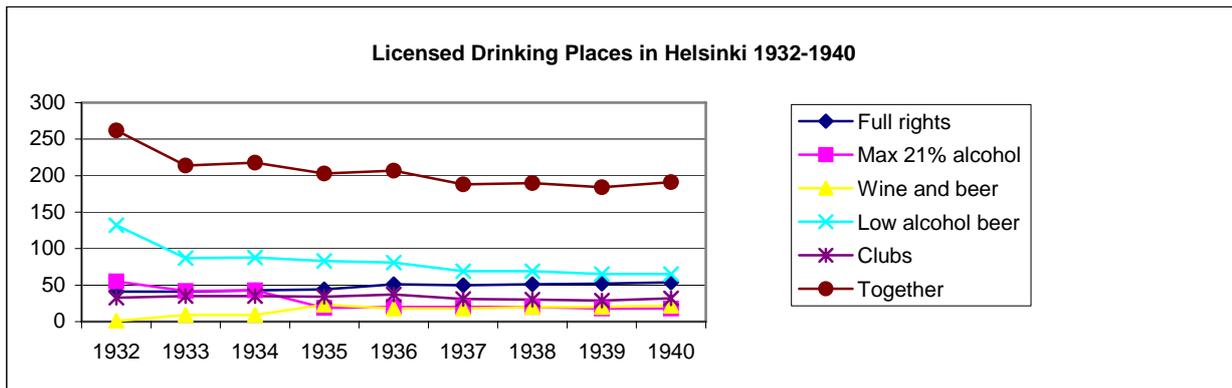
²³ LOGAV, f. R-3395, op. 1, d. 3, l. 9, 20.

²⁴ Takala, *Veselié Rusi*, p. 216.

²⁵ Kansallisarkisto (KA, Finnish National Archive), Kauppa- ja teollisuusministeriö KD 147/395, Ca 1, päiväkirjakonseptit; Ea 2, Maaherrojen komitealle lähettämät lääniensä poliisiviranomaisten em. liikkeitä ja niissä havaittuja epäkohtia koskevat lausunnot 1920-1921; Komiteamietintö N:o 24, 1921.

²⁶ KA, Helsingin poliisilaitos, Rikososasto: Väkijuomaosasto, Kieltolakietsivien päiväkirjaraportit 1923-24, 1927-29.

²⁷ Helsingin tilastollinen vuosikirja 1941. In comparison Copenhagen had c. 1300 licensed drinking places in 1938 and only c. 8 arrests for drunkenness per thousand inhabitants, when in Helsinki the number of arrests stayed around 100 per thousand inhabitants through the interwar period. Salme Ahlström-Laakso, *Juopumuspidätys – sosiaalisen kontrollin keino: Helsingin ja Kööpenhaminan vertailu*. Alkoholipoliittisen tutkimuslaitoksen tutkimusseloste 37, 1969, p. 30.



In mid 1930s the temperance movement started renewed pressure for further control, although there was already a rather complicated system of rules about when, how and to whom drinks could be served. For example, bars and bar chairs in restaurants were prohibited, because it was thought prostitutes would use them. In 1935 dance was prohibited in all but first class restaurants. Dance with drinking was feared to increase loose sexual behaviour and venereal diseases.²⁸ The dance debate is a rather extreme example about the attitude of temperance movement towards drinking facilities. Nevertheless, it shows well that they were not regarded as part of everyday life, but a space, which made people to deviate from their high moral standards and right ways of behaviour. It is also one example about the stricter norms applied for drinking women. As in Leningrad, women going to restaurant without male companions were considered suspicious or were simply denied access to the places.²⁹ Working class “beer-restaurants” aroused worries too; beer was seen as a way to alcoholism and it was prohibited to serve beer to people wearing working clothes. In an interview in a social democratic newspaper a worker, who had used beer-restaurants, and apparently felt bad about it, put the responsibility on the beer places by stating that “it feels that there are too many temptations around now”³⁰ Again, in the light of reports by police and Alko’s inspectors the worries about growing drunkenness and decadence in the public drinking places seem to have been overestimated. Inspectors concluded that in 1932 restaurants in Helsinki “were quiet”. In most towns illegal alcohol was still the main problem³¹ and arrests for drunkenness in the open city spaces remained very high in Helsinki through the interwar period³².

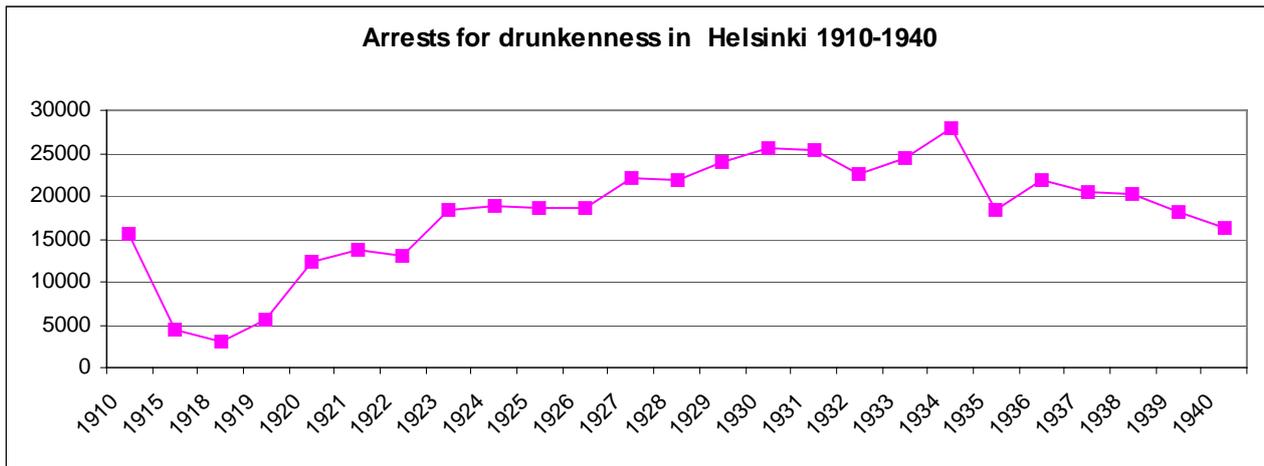
²⁸ Sillanpää, *Säännöstelty huvi*, p. 67. Jussi Simpura, *Vapaan viinan aika. 50 vuotta suomalaista alkoholipolitiikkaa* (Helsinki 1982), p. 129. Kauppalehti 28 April 1948.

²⁹ KA, Alkon arkisto, tarkastuskertomukset, kunnalliset tarkastajat 1932-1933. See especially Vyborg and Turku. The exclusion of lonely women from drinking facilities continued till the early 1960s. Hanna Kuusi, *Viinistä vapautta. Alkoholii, hallinta ja identiteetti 1960-luvun Suomessa* (Helsinki 2003), pp. 296-297.

³⁰ Suomen sosialidemokraatti 4 February 1938.

³¹ KA, Alkon arkisto, tarkastuskertomukset, kunnalliset tarkastajat 1932-1933.

³² Helsingin kaupungin tilastollinen vuosikirja, 1918-1940.



3. Conclusions

The great structural changes in the drink trade during the 1920s and after- the prohibition of public drinking or at least fewer facilities offering alcohol for consumption on the premises, the elimination of private ownership of taverns in the Soviet Union, and the capricious suppression of alcohol outlets had big effects on the functions and sociability of taverns and public drinking in general. In both cities taverns were handled as places as causing trouble and disorder, as some of them without doubt did. Both regimes responded to what they saw as deficiencies in public order with increasing control over all drinking places. Taverns became less accessible and more controlled; authorities had increasing powers in defining where public drinking facilities can open and who can enter one. Public drinking places were also classified, though in different ways, in both cities. What is clear is that the functions of the public drinking facilities as places for a variety of activities, as dance and games, were reduced strongly by growing regulation. Drinkers were pushed to private premises or streets and there was less commercial public space available especially for the worker population in general. Taverns lost their position as a place for traditional neighbourhood sociability. Still, the suppression of public drinking facilities did not stop people drinking or diminish drink related problems – it merely changed the place and social context of drinking. However, for the uses of public drinking places this meant increasing regulation, observation and differential access to them. By controlling drink related activities the authorities were also strongly regulating how the public space was used and shaped.

