

Food and Patriotism in Russia from *Domostroi* to Viazemsky: The Case of *Kvas**

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Abstract

This essay explores how one of the most ordinary Russian beverages, *kvas*, came to function in the Russian literary imagination. Looking at poets over the course of almost a hundred years—Kantemir, Trediakovsky, Derzhavin, and Viazemsky, from 1729-1827—I show that Russian attitudes toward *kvas* as expressed in literature become dual, with some writers honoring the beverage as something quintessentially “ours” and others seeing its valorization as a mark of hypocrisy and pretense. The complex relationships between simple folk

and the aristocracy, seen through the prism of literary genres and periods leading up to romanticism, cause us to read these texts carefully and think expansively in each case about what is being represented: food and drink, or the values that stand behind them? I argue that *kvas* corresponds to the platform of cultural self-sufficiency that is a mainstay of Russian national identity, a form of autarky, but that the term coined by Prince Viazemsky in 1827, “*kvas* patriotism,” identifies a negative limitation of that self-definition.

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They needed *kvas* no less than air.
Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*

Representations of food and drink in Russian literature date to the very first known writings, and scholars have documented how native and imported foods entered literary texts, including sacred ones. Over the course of Russian history, feeding oneself and one's family has come to be represented in literature as an essential part of Russian identity, in part because of the extreme climate in much of the space Russians came to inhabit. While the importance of eating and drinking in human life is obvious from nutritional, anthropological, and historical points of view, in literary works the depiction of recurrent human needs for food, comfort, and family lends them ritual significance.

The very categories of East and West, of "Russia" and "Europe," that constitute Russia's understanding of itself and its identity play out in literary representations of food and drink as well. Looking at this ontological discourse, scholar Sara Dickinson has argued that "negative perceptions of Russia [in Russian travel writing] were just a stone's throw away from the proud recognition of apparent deficiencies as specific national virtues" (130). "In fact," Dickinson continues, "the affectionate appreciation of Russian shortcomings became a favorite tactic in rhetorical struggles with Western European culture" (130). And if the Latin phrase "To me even smoke from the fatherland is sweet and pleasant" (*I dym otechestva mne sladok i priiaten*) was adopted in sentimental literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, how much sweeter were the actually tasty homegrown foods and domestic beverages that were found both in modest homesteads and on the menus of aristocratic estates? In Russian literature of many genres—from satiric poetry to pastoral idylls, didactic novels, and lyrical novellas—food and drink, and the means of sharing them, have helped to define what it means to be Russian.

This essay will explore how one of the most ordinary Russian beverages, *kvas*, came to function in the Russian literary imagination. On the whole, it is the simplest foods and drinks—cabbage and bread and *kvas*—and the fanciest—caviar and champagne—that have graced the

imaginations and the dinner tables of Russians throughout the centuries, and it is these that have captured the attention of historians and writers as well. As we shall see by looking at poets over the course of almost a hundred years—Kantemir, Trediakovsky, Derzhavin, and Viazemsky, from 1729-1827—in literature Russian attitudes toward *kvass* become dual, with some writers honoring the beverage as something quintessentially “ours” and others seeing its valorization as a mark of hypocrisy and pretense. The complex relationships between simple folk and the aristocracy, seen through the prism of literary genres and periods leading up to romanticism, cause us to read these texts carefully and think expansively in each case about what is being represented: food and drink, or the values that stand behind them?

***Kvass* in Russia: Just Native or Also Patriotic?**

Kvass is brewed from local ingredients: boiled water, rye and barley malt, yeast, sugar, a little wheat flour, and a raisin or two, or alternatively, crusts of rye bread added to water with sugar, yeast, rye flour and raisins. According to linguist Horace Lunt, the drink is attested as early as 996 in the *Primary Chronicle*, where Prince Volodymir shared it with his subjects as one form of *pit'e i iadeni'e* (drink and food) at court and distributed it via wagons to the sick and the poor (Lunt 23). Russian literature later traced its beginnings to that same *Primary Chronicle*, despite the centuries' long rift between that text and the emergence of the imperial Russia that counts its history from the first ruler to declare himself Tsar, Ivan IV, in the sixteenth century. In later centuries, *kvass* was adopted as central to Russian Muscovite life and entered the diet as a refreshing beverage and as the base for cold summer soups such as *okroshka*. Snezana Tempest, a scholar of Russian literature and folklore, describes how the native drink *kvass* took on a key role in Russian daily life early on, replacing the most ancient Russian drinks, *beriozovitsa* (birch beverage) and *medovukha* (mead) (3). Only in the mid-nineteenth century did the imported drink tea gain in popularity and accessibility; until then, Russians made their own beverages at home from what was available.

The light alcoholic content of the drink (1-1.5%) keeps it fresh without inducing drunkenness. Its preparation is particularly suited to the conditions of Russian home cooking: warmed until it begins to ferment, in or near the Russian stove, *kvas* can then be put on ice and kept cool until needed as a beverage or a soup base. Cheap and easily brewed, *kvas* features in culinary histories and cookbooks as well as chronicles and household manuals, and it was taken up by Russian poets and writers to become something significantly more important than its modest origins might have predicted. We will look at all of these genres—historical chronicles, household manuals, cookbooks, and poetry—to explore the literary meaning of this quintessential Russian beverage that became charged with more than just nutrition or pleasure. Indeed, *kvas* came to represent Russianness itself.

In the late seventeenth century, Russia began to look to the outside world for cultural and political structures. As semioticians Juri Lotman and Boris Uspensky have argued, “the activities of Peter the Great in Russia largely amount to a struggle with the old rituals and symbols, which was expressed in the creation of *new signs*” (212, emphasis in original). We can apply this formulation to *kvas* and say that it too became a sign, a signal, to represent a certain Russian cultural identity. We can see the drinking of *kvas* (and the representation of drinking *kvas*) as a symbol of old rituals, tying imperial Russian culture to earlier discourses from chronicles and medieval texts, while the rejection of *kvas* was akin to the rejection of wearing beards or Russian-style clothing, practices repudiated in the Petrine era. Lotman and Uspensky define culture as “the *nonhereditary memory of the community*, a memory expressing itself in a system of constraints and prescriptions,” a “social phenomenon” (213, emphasis in original). *Kvas*, too, is a social phenomenon, and like other forms of food and drink, speaks to the identity and beliefs of those who make and consume it.

The centrality of *kvas* in Russian culture and its celebration in literature fed into the selection of the word in a coinage by Prince Pyotr Viazemsky (1792-1878), who chose *kvas* to translate a French concept for a phenomenon he recognized at home as well. Viazemsky’s “*kvas patriotism*” represents not the valued essence of Russianness, but a prideful

and false nationalism, a chest-beating xenophobic attitude that rejects the Europeanizing reforms of Peter the Great and the general encroaching of Western culture in Russia. Thus, in the post-Napoleonic age “*kvas* patriotism” turned national pride and patriotic feeling inside out, and we can trace Viazemsky’s choice of the term to the uses of *kvas* in literature in the eighteenth century, which have both positive and negative valences. As I will argue, the beverage *kvas* corresponds to the platform of cultural self-sufficiency that is a mainstay of Russian national identity, but “*kvas* patriotism” identifies a negative limitation of that self-definition. Returning to Viazemsky at the end of the essay, we will see that in his own poetry he mocked *kvas*-lovers as backward and looked to Europe himself. But not all Russian writers did. It is essential to also keep in mind what Peter Rutland calls the Russian “autarkic impulse,” a desire for economic self-sufficiency and protection and “preservation of national values and communities” (342).

The “autarkic impulse” has been present in Russian culture at an individual level for centuries, sometimes rising to the level of government policy, and it can be seen precisely in such activities as the homebrewing of *kvas* and other beverages. The famous *Domostroi*, an anonymous early sixteenth century household advice manual, is an excellent place to begin to explore the trope of economic self-sufficiency. The unknown author of this work carefully dictates how a small landowner should live: namely, according to Christian scripture, Russian tradition, and economic principles of self-interest. The book has often been cited to criticize the old-fashioned practices that it promotes, since at certain junctures the author does suggest that beating one’s wife or at least curtailing her freedom may be necessary to keep the household united. For this and other reasons *Domostroi* became synonymous with repressive patriarchal attitudes. Nonetheless, the *Domostroi* offers sage advice, for example when stating the following about life in a pre-market economy and a geographic location with severe weather conditions:

In regards to all your household objects, the tools used in your shops, your commercial goods, the contents of your treasury, living chambers, courtyard, and supply rooms,

your villages, the objects used in crafts, your accounts (both income and expenses), your credits and your debts: gather all unto yourself. These are the resources by which you live. Hold your purchases in line with your income and expenses. (*Domostroi* 122)

Russian households such as the one described here could have upwards of two hundred people—including servants and relatives along with the immediate family—and thus taking such care with the household accounts was both prudent and wise. Such appeals to self-sufficiency found in Rutland’s “autarkic impulse” and the attitude of the *Domostroi*’s author are emblematic of Russian identity in later periods as well and can be traced in the work of Russian poets in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, particularly in their representation of *kvas*.

Starting with the satirical poet Antiokh Kantemir (1708-1744), who wrote about his homeland while serving as a diplomat abroad, we will pause in the mid-eighteenth century with poet and translator Vasily Trediakovsky (1703-1769) and at the turn of the nineteenth century with poet-statesman Gavril Derzhavin (1743-1816), both of whom celebrated the Russian countryside and its lifeways. Moving into the Romantic era, we will circle back to Viazemsky, who prefers European fare to Russian *kvas*. Along the way we find two very concrete attitudes about the homemade beverage: as a beloved and refreshing drink that evokes pastoral country landscapes and as a backward bumpkinesque symbol of non-Europeanness. Sometimes authors allow themselves to take both attitudes at once.

Kantemir: A Satirical Look at Russian Backwardness

Taking an attitude of parody toward conservative mores such as those demonstrated in the *Domostroi*, poet and diplomat Antiokh Kantemir highlights the traditional connection between proper eating and drinking and a moral life, only to denigrate it in favor of learning and progress. In his first satire, “On the Detractors of Learning—To

My Mind” (1729), Kantemir explicitly ties good morals (*nравы*) to other Russian habits. The satire features various characters who attack learning, each in a different way but all seeing in it a threat to Russian identity. Kantemir shows those who oppose education only to ridicule them and their outdated views.

The first character we meet is the god-fearing Kriton. A pious soul, as the poet describes him, Kriton sees knowledge-seeking to be sacrilegious:

Our children who before, obedient,
And humble in their fathers’ footsteps went
To serve their God, and heard what they knew not in fear,
Now, led astray, into the Bible peer;
Discuss, seek reasons, ask the causes for,
And to the priestly rank grant slight accord;
Lack manners, drink no *kvas*, and if you beat
Them with a stick they’ll eat no salted meat.
They place no candles, fast days have forgot,
And to the Church no temporal power allot. (“Satire I” 156)

Not drinking *kvas*, like skipping Orthodox rituals such as placing candles and fasting, becomes dangerous in this satire. “Detractors of learning” believe the old ways are the best ways, but the reader of the satire understands that *kvas* should be left in the past. Here Kriton is “complaining about how the practices of Orthodoxy in everyday life are being abandoned” (Shcheglov 51). But as linguist Viktor Zhivov has argued, “the Petrine era became the starting point for modern Russian history, whatever particular area of the historical process (cultural, literary, etc.) was involved” (218). To this we might add food and drink, patently part of the historical process. Kantemir believed that under Peter I “we suddenly became a new people” (Zhivov 206); Peter’s deliberate unhitching of political and cultural life from the traditions of the past had the power to be transformative for his subjects. Writing slightly after Peter’s reign, Kantemir continues to champion the direction of Peter’s reforms, and thus for him, *kvas* and salted meat alike are

religious and reactionary political choices, choices that he as a modern man rejects in favor of education.

In Kantemir's view, the simple Russian habits associated with native foods and devotion are to be mocked, and *kvas* along with them. But for detractors of Peter's reforms, like the religious patriot Kriton, education seems to lead directly to immorality: "The more one knows, the more the truth one shuns" ("Satire I" 156; in Russian: "Больше врет, кому далось больше разумети" 57). Another detractor, Silvan, maintains that "learning [...] just leads us to starvation" (158):

We lived ere learning Latin well before,
Compared to now we had a great deal more.
In ignorance we reaped more grain; instead,
Now learning foreign tongues, we've lost our bread. (158)

By suggesting that agricultural success can only be achieved by looking inward, Silvan touts a principle akin to Rutland's "autarkic impulse," and Kantemir goads his reader into understanding the absurdity of Silvan's juxtaposition. Before learning encroached on the land, this argument goes, Russia was profitable and we lived in plenty, but with the distraction of newfangled bookishness the harvests are meager. While famine, never a stranger to Russian lands, can arguably be linked to excessively theoretical approaches to agriculture (as it will be during the Stalinist cruel collectivization campaign in the early 1930s and even in Nikita Khrushchev's virgin lands and corn projects), here Silvan's exaggerated reasoning is deliberately silly. He, like Kriton, argues a point for which the satirist himself has no patience, and Kantemir's reader remains unconvinced.

A third detractor, Luka, is not interested in churchgoing, *kvas*, the production of the grain used to make it, or in knowledge of any kind, but anacreontically prefers stronger drink consumed in fellowship:

God made us social creatures, and we own
The gift of reason not for us alone. [...]
We should enjoy our life to the last bit,

For since it isn't long—why shorten it?
 All bent in two, burning your eyes away?
 Is it not better drinking night and day?
 Wine is a gift of God and more zest lends
 To conversation, and makes people friends.
 It brings good cheer and drives off weighty thoughts,
 Emboldens weaklings, lightens poor men's lots.
 (“Satire I” 159)

A happy and social being, Luka finds that wine smooths his path and makes life more pleasurable. Associating learning with moroseness (угрюмость – “weighty thoughts” in the above translation), he prefers other beverages to *kvas* but in so doing reiterates another well-known Russian trait, the love of strong drink. His ideas are preposterous—as is well-documented, strong drink increased the coffers of the tsarist government but never lightened poverty for the individual—but they do portray the possibility of wine-inspired exchanges (note also that in the eighteenth century “*vino*” or wine frequently refers to vodka). After describing yet another detractor of Peter’s educational program at length, the dandy Medor, Kantemir completes the poem by advising his mind to stay at home in its quiet haven. Note for him the cry of these detractors: “We see that learning’s fruits are rare—Though crammed the scholar’s head, his hands are bare” (“Satire I” 162; in Russian: «Никакой плод не видим с науки, Ученых хоть голова полна—пусты руки» [61]).

The life Kantemir describes in his first satire has moved very far indeed from notions of food in the *Primary Chronicle*, where as Horace Lunt shows excessive indulgence in food and drink was portrayed as leading to sin, and pleasure more generally was shunned (17). But despite Peter’s efforts to modernize society and bring Russians into educated Western spheres, in 1729 Kantemir still feels the need to highlight remaining links between Orthodoxy and ignorance, between the joys of *kvas* and *vino* and a backward population. In sum, Kantemir lampoons the “old” Russian ways and *kvas* along with them.

Trediakovsky: Russianizing Horace in the Countryside

Vasily Trediakovsky penned his “Stanzas in Praise of Country Life” (“Строфы похвальные поселянскому житию”) in 1752. In this poem, he paints an idyllic country landscape featuring a sampler of activities both leisurely and laborious, from walking in the woods and meadows to sharpening scythes and shearing sheep. In imitation of Horace’s second epode, which was published in 30 BCE, Trediakovsky composed his own poem at the same time as he was writing an essay on what he called the purity and pleasures of rural life. In that essay (1849, 722-42), the poet muses on the classics, including Horace, Seneca, Virgil as well as the Bible, but rather than merely indulging himself in Roman imaginings, Trediakovsky was mulling over the more general contrast between urban and rural life as well as its Russian versions. We can compare Trediakovsky’s poem to many other translations of the same work by Horace, some of which hew closely to the Latin original in speaking of olives and lemons, of Priapus—fertility god and protector of livestock and gardens—and of classic places and persons: Phasis and Ionia, Apulia and Sabine. In contrast, though Trediakovsky ‘copies’ or translates some specifics from Homer, including the idea of a self-sufficient homestead, he also adds enough local Russian color to qualify this poem as an independent work that contributes, *avant la lettre*, to the national discourse about “*kvas* patriotism” conceived in a positive light.

Trediakovsky’s unnamed hero in this poem is of indeterminate class: on one hand, he spends time fishing and only occasionally shears the sheep, thus he is probably a nobleman. At the same time, he tends his own orchard, grafting apples and keeping a close eye on all farming endeavors. He is not the self-indulgent landlord seeking to exploit serf labor and extract financial gain from the estate over which he rules but rather enjoys the pursuits of a gentleman farmer. It is he who makes most decisions about what happens on his land, and some of those decisions are related to what livestock to keep, what game to stock, what fruits to grow, and what beverages to prepare.

The poem opens describing its hero as *schastliv*, the Russian equivalent of both “happy” and “lucky” in English. Importantly, the hero

lives in peace without worries,
As if in a golden age, and without enemies;
Tilling the soil with an ancestral plow,
And moreover without a single debt. (“Stanzas” 192)

This classical golden age aligns with contemporary Russian values of peace, prosperity, and comfort. Almost a garden of Eden, the Russian land offers up bounty:

As autumn becomes enriched with fruit,
Many apples, pears and many plums;
O! how it brings happiness to one’s full heart,
To see their great size, their juiciness. (193)

Toward the end of this lyrical poem, Trediakovsky sounds the patriotic gong when it comes to dining. Having identified a wife (whom he calls “Sarra or Susanna,” using the Biblical names of the best and most virtuous women), the poet delineates her role:

[She] prepares an entire not-purchased dinner,
Makes sure that the food is tasty,
Catches live birds for the main dish
Gets other things ready for the table as well. (194)

Sarra and Susanna are Trediakovsky’s invention, not imported from the Latin original, but this “not-purchased” dinner (a neologism in Russian, though an idea straight from Horace) nonetheless becomes key to the trope of life on the Russian country estate. As historian Priscilla Roosevelt has carefully documented, Russia’s “educated elite” saw in the estate “a retreat, a refuge from an official world they despise [...] an idyllic space where [...] the true Russia might be found” (xiii). Roosevelt’s book *Life on the Russian Country Estate* details the enormous, expensive hothouses and significant botanical efforts of the wealthiest Russians, but she also highlights the romantic cult of the natural that we are just beginning to see in Trediakovsky’s poem. For example:

Begone, capons, and birds of Africa,
Whose sumptuous taste describes the palate;
Away, Burgundy wines and champagnes,
And you, begone, robust *Pontac*.¹

Only cabbage soup satisfies, a soft hunk of bread,
Young lamb now and again;
In this house, he has all he needs,
On holidays he drinks beer, but *kvas* every day. (195)

The context of this statement reiterates the truth of the “autarkic impulse” for mid-eighteenth-century Russia. Trediakovsky highlights the foreign drinks he chooses *not* to laud, addressing them individually by region of origin and by label, and despises very particular exotic game birds, implicitly deriding the self-indulgent expensive tastes of the aristocracy. As other lovers of the Russian essence will do in subsequent decades, he praises *Russian* foods and drink. The fatted lambs in his poem come from Horace’s pastoral scene, but only in Russia do sorrel and cabbage reign. To conclude the stanza, as we saw above, Trediakovsky makes an important point about the poem’s hero: “On holidays he drinks beer, but *kvas* every day.” Ever frugal, the Russian patriot avoids imported foods and wines and settles for the homemade tastes of native drinks. The choice of beverage—thirst-quenching *kvas*—for daily consumption underlines the simplicity of his country life, and this lovely idyllic poem is exemplary of how Trediakovsky contributed to shaping Russian national consciousness.

Derzhavin: Life on the Russian Country Estate

Like Trediakovsky, Gavrila Derzhavin translated and rendered this very same Horatian epode as “In Praise of Country Life” (1798). In his version, Derzhavin contrasted foreign foods (such as the oysters, mussels, and frog legs favored by the French) to healthy Russian foods and

¹ Arnaud de Pontac was a French winemaker and importer of the sixteenth century who seems to have been one of the first to place his name on a wine label.

drinks: hot cabbage soup (*shchi*), home-cured ham, cheese, bread and salt, homebrewed wine and beer (104). No surprise, then, that some years later Derzhavin explored life in the Russian countryside at greater length, with a focus on the joys of producing, displaying, and sharing one's own food and drink. Although Derzhavin never mentioned *kvas* explicitly in his poetry, it is worth looking briefly at the close parallel we see in his work between a preference for national foods and beverages and outright Russian patriotic fervor.

A self-made and self-educated man, Derzhavin had a military and government career, eventually serving three tsars: Empress Catherine, her son Paul, and his son Alexander. Even while living in St. Petersburg, Derzhavin led an autarkic life in a sprawling estate-like house on the Fontanka River with animals and kitchen gardens. But this urban household was nothing compared to Derzhavin's later country home *Zvanka*, north of Novgorod. With intrigues brewing at court, as early as the 1790s Derzhavin began to spend summer months at *Zvanka*, contemplating a retirement far from the imperial capital, and it was there that he truly began to value and celebrate a traditional Russian lifestyle. By the first decade of the nineteenth century and until his death in 1816, Derzhavin lived almost full time on the banks of the Volkhov River.

Expanding on his Horatian imitation, Derzhavin penned a longer poem in answer to a request from Eugene Bolkhovitinov, a neighbor who admired Derzhavin's work. In this vivid poem, "To Eugene: Life at *Zvanka*" (1807), Derzhavin's focus on native provisions is front and center. Politically conservative in his later years, Derzhavin struggled against the Francophilia he saw around him, and as Napoleon's power increased on the continent, the value of Derzhavin's estate's fresh produce grew for him both personally and ideologically. The rumblings from Europe ever since the French Revolution had been worrisome to Derzhavin, and from the countryside he could clearly see that a dependence on imported goods (whether champagne and port wines or fancy Holland lace) was both illogical in the face of potential Russian bounty and also dangerous.

Both “In Praise” and “To Eugene” start in the same way, evoking the blessings of an independent life tied to the land. The first, drawing on Horace, begins:

His lot is blessed who, far from strife,
Like to the first-born of our bloodline,
Puts father’s land to plow
With labor free—no hirelings,
Who works no oxen but his own. (“In Praise” 103)

“To Eugene” also highlights the importance of self-sufficiency:

Blest is that man who least depends on other men,
Whose life is free from debt and from capricious striving,
Who goeth not to court for praise, or gold to lend;
And shuns all vanities conniving! (124)

The next stanza contrasts country and city living, and the poet asks:

Why venture to Petropolis, if uncompelled,
Change space for closeness, liberty for locks and latches,
Live weighed with luxury and wealth, their siren spell,
Enduring the Gentry’s quizzing glances?

Can such a life compare with golden freedom here,
With Zvanka’s solitude, with Zvanka’s rest and quiet?
Abundance, health, sweet concord with my wife—and peace
To round my days, these I require. (“To Eugene” 124)

This traditional representation of city life—as a trap of wealth and social climbing—contrasts with the abundance of life in the provinces, exemplified in Zvanka. Derzhavin here seems to echo the author of the *Domostroi* who praised self-sufficiency and to reveal the “autarkic impulse” again. Along those lines, both poems also portray orchards, flocks, and pastures, but “To Eugene” offers a clear picture of food

patriotism in the dining routine at *Zvanka*, specifically designed to imply harmonious company. Noting that homemade beverages could take the place of imported wines, Derzhavin aligned himself with the most ancient of Russian beverages, in this case the lightly effervescent birch beer that is more festive than the everyday *kvas* in which he surely also indulged. The poem goes on:

When noon has struck, the servants rush to dress the board;
 The mistress leads our troop of guests to sit at table,
 And to my gaze the varied dishes there award
 A patterned garden, neatly angled.

The crimson ham, green sorrel soup with yolks of gold,
 The rose-gold pie, the cheese that's white, the crayfish scarlet,
 The caviar, deep amber, black, the pike's stripes bold,
 Its feather blue, delight the eyesight.

Delight the eye and joy to every sense impart;
 Though not with glut or spices brought from foreign harbors,
 But with their pure and wholesome Russian heart:
 Provisions native, fresh and healthful. ("To Eugene" 128)

As in "In Praise" and Trediakovsky's "Stanzas," the wife presides over home-grown and home-made comestibles (although it may be unlikely that the caviar was harvested on site). Most importantly, this plenty is located deep inside Russia. Retreating from the city and its cares into the countryside, Russians on the cusp of the nineteenth century could enjoy the fruits of their own labor (or the labor of their serfs) and of nature: rivers brimming with fish, mushroom- and berry-filled forests, kitchen gardens, and *kvas*, made fresh or bottled.

Such a Russian identity was portrayed negatively in Kantemir's pro-Petrine text some one hundred years earlier, when he satirized the drinking of *kvas* and saw it as part of the anti-progressive attitudes that were holding his homeland back. However, the potential of Russian autarky in the country becomes more and more important by the eve

of the Napoleonic wars. Both Trediakovsky and Derzhavin highlight the joy and simplicity of the country idyll and demonstrate just how essential Russian homemade, home-brewed beverages are to Russian identity. Their praise of the self-sufficient lifestyle summons a positive view of national tastes, a patriotic impulse inhering in local food production. These and other Russian poets—born into the nobility but often not particularly wealthy—chose to represent the Russian essence in their writing as enthusiastically prudent. Pristine and safe, the Russian countryside was filled with capable people honoring their own traditions. And making and drinking *kvas*.

Viazemsky: Poet of the Road Contemplates the Russian Post Station

Our final writer, Prince Pyotr Viazemsky, was known for poetry featuring “stylistic exuberance and seemingly pointless digressions,” as literary scholar Otto Boele has written (25). This stance, deliberately dilettante, had a certain chic nonetheless that was valued by his peers. In 1825, Viazemsky composed one of many of his travel poems, “The Station” (*Stantsiia*), a long and humorous piece which he supplied with equally long and amusing commentaries. Here Viazemsky participates in the same ongoing debate about evaluating the rural: it’s all very well and good to sing the idyllic country life, Viazemsky suggests, but is Russia, old Russia, with no modern conveniences but plenty of *kvas*, even tolerable for the nineteenth century man?

In Viazemsky’s view, the conditions of Russian travel on the post road quash any patriotic feeling. Himself a great traveler, particularly to the west (Poland, France, England), Viazemsky praises in “The Station” the tsar he calls “mighty Peter” (*Царь могучий*), but he cannot help regretting that the tsar’s Europeanization plan for the Russian empire did not include infrastructure in the form of decent highways. Russia was able to demonstrate its superiority over Europe in the Napoleonic wars, as Viazemsky jokes: “a military road / We do know how to lay: / We’ve been to Paris, thank the lord” (военную дорогу / Прокладывать

умеем мы: / В Париже были, слава богу [*Stikhotvoreniia* 176]). But everyday infrastructure was utterly lacking.

Comparing his Russian travels to past travel experiences elsewhere, Viazemsky's narrator laments his current circumstances as he sits waiting for horses at a Russian post station. If he had been in Warsaw, he would have been able to enjoy the charms of a Polish beauty, the tasty treats Warsaw has to offer: "chicken, crayfish and asparagus" ("цыплята, раки, спаржа, [...]«Kurczeta, raczki i szparagi» [*Stikhotvoreniia* 179]), and even (as he details in his own commentary), the Polish people's national love of spectacle at a crowded theatrical evening (184). Instead, he is stuck in the Russian hinterland, where the only comestibles are *kvas* and bread. Viazemsky ruminates:

Hungry, I glance toward the table,
 But see instead a living meal,
 Right next to me, some on two legs
 And others on four, animal types,
 Though hungry, to my great chagrin,
 I see a fearful family group,
 As if just waking, I note around me,
 The ham crowds in a friendly way.
 But I'm not sad: while the *kvas* is young,
 And the bread a little aged,
 I can lull my hunger to sleep
 With hope, the sister of memory.
 Choosing to keep the peasant's fast,
 I'm happy to remind myself:
 I've drunk down truffles with champagne,
 God grant, that time won't be the last. (*Stikhotvoreniia* 178-79)

As Viazemsky here describes, Europe is linked with truffles and champagne, while Russia signifies bread and *kvas*. It is obvious which fare the poet prefers, but here he resists cursing his fate, instead crying: "wouldn't it be better to stop my tongue / with a patriotic seal" (Патриотической печатью / Не лучше ли скрепить язык? [178]).

Waiting for horses, he lets his leisured pen do the walking (Итак, пока нет лошадей,/ Пером досужным погуляю [...] [182]). That patriotic seal, though, in the context of “young *kvas*,” sets the scene for the more significant contribution Viazemsky makes to Russian cultural understanding with his notion of “*kvas* patriotism.”

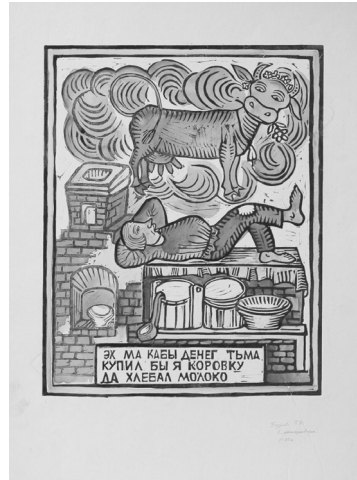
Kvas Patriotism

Kvas is easy to make, easy to drink, and requires only the simplest of ingredients. Indeed, it was more accessible than milk. As we see in this colorful cartoon-like image, for the Russian peasant, plentiful milk remains but a dream:

Akh. If only I had scads of money.
I would buy a cow
and drink milk all day. (Dal 97)

This hand-painted lithograph imitates a *lubok*, a native Russian genre of simple woodcut with brief accompanying verses, and uses a proverb attested in Vladimir Dal’s 1862 collection. It also brings us back to the question of *kvas* patriotism. Russian literary elites of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would have known folk poetry and proverbs, and they might well have imagined peasant dreams like the one portrayed here. More accessible to the peasant, though, was *kvas*, a beverage that could be made even by the poorest household.

Having come upon the French concept of *patriotisme d’antichambre* while abroad, Viazemsky began to muse on the question of whether this phenomenon might also exist in Russia, and if so, in what it would consist. In his third “Letter from Paris,” published in the journal *Moskovskii telegraf*, Viazemsky wrote: “Many see patriotism as unqualified praise of



“Ekh ma kaby denegt t’ma,” hand-tinted lithograph by Genrietta Tekhonova Bodrova, 1980

everything that is your own. [French economist A.R.J.] Turgot called this lackey patriotism, *du patriotisme d'antichambre*. In our country we could call it ‘*kvas* patriotism’” (“Pis’ma iz Parizha”). In economic terms this phenomenon emerges as isolationism or protectionism and can be accompanied by tariffs, but in a household such a stance implies both pride—of accomplishment, of ownership, of heritage—and perhaps, as Viazemsky saw it, also a lack of self-confidence.

Turgot’s idea of “servant patriotism” describes a situation where a servant, living with the master and the master’s things, feels envy and inferiority that manifests as pride. By praising his master, the lackey demonstrates pride in that which is not his own, boosting his personal status through this wishful identification. Some three decades later Ivan Turgenev would portray a similar situation in his novel *Fathers and Children* (*Отцы и дети*), in which Bazarov, the novel’s protagonist, carelessly mistakes the number of serfs on his father’s estate. “‘If I remember correctly, they have fifteen serfs,’ Bazarov says to his friend Arkady. ‘Twenty-two in all,’ Timofeich observed with some dissatisfaction” (*Fathers and Sons* 88). (“Душ, помнится, пятнадцать.” “И все двадцать две,” с неудовольствием заметил Тимофеич [*Ottsy i deti* 209].) This pride—pride of ownership, Russian pride—fits Turgot’s definition exactly. Bazarov considers the patriarchal Russian institution of serfdom to be an embarrassment, and in speaking to Arkady, whose own father freed his serfs before being required to do so by law, Bazarov underplays the economic importance of serfdom on his small family estate. The serf himself begs to differ, demonstrating that same “unqualified praise of all that is your own.” Timofeich is proud to be part of a larger property holding. He thus indulges in “*kvas* patriotism.”

Conclusion

In looking at how poets used *kvas* in their satires and pastoral poems, we have explored both negative connotations and positive ones. For Kantemir, *kvas* goes along with retrograde Orthodox Christian lifestyles, while for Trediakovsky, *kvas* is homemade, “our” Russian drink, and enables independence from European markets and fashions.

Derzhavin too favors autarky and home-grown foods and drinks. Russia's quintessential writer Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), as we see in the epigraph to this essay, similarly portrays *kvas*-drinking lovingly in his novel-in-verse *Eugene Onegin*. The noble inhabitants of Pushkin's Russian countryside remain innocent, Orthodox believers who are not yet hypocritical, who believe that on the Russian Orthodox holiday of Shrovetide (*Maslenitsa*), true Russians eat *bliny* and drink *kvas*.

When Viazemsky brings up *kvas* in his poetry, he has returned to a Kantemir-style dislike. Our inns are poor, he says, our roads inferior, and I long to escape to western civilized lands—beginning with Poland. A lover of foreign language, foreign beauties, and even foreign foods, Viazemsky believes that with “*kvas* patriotism” he is translating a French concept into his native tongue. But in coining the term “*kvas* patriotism” Viazemsky harkens back to the East/West dichotomy that lies at the base of modern Russian identity. If Pushkin gently teases the inhabitants of isolated country homes, Viazemsky rejects them altogether, finding their naivete embarrassing and backward. Accordingly, the expression “*kvas* patriotism” has come to be associated with anti-cosmopolitan views commonly expressed by Russians living at the most basic levels of subsistence. Representations of food, and drinks such as *kvas*, both reflect and shape cultural tropes. In the literary texts we discussed above, national patriotism, and authors' relationships to it, are embedded in signs and symbols, and *kvas* has come to loom large among them.

Current political activity in twenty-first century Russia and the resulting international economic sanctions on Russians may force the entire country into autarky. On Russian independent media podcasts in recent months, the word autarkism is being invoked with more and more frequency. But that state will not be unfamiliar, given how central the cultural trope of economic self-sufficiency has been in the past. Today's news out of Russia suggests a rhetoric of patriotism that comes from above rather than below. For example, Russian nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (1946-2022) was known to proclaim “we don't need Coca-Cola, we need *kvas*” (*Chto sluchilos'* 2022). In an April 2021 interview aired on *60 Minutes*, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov lamented the complaints of his compatriots about sanctions on

imported foods and suggested they should think less about their refrigerators and more, quoting American president John Kennedy, “about what they can do for their country.” The Russian version of *60 Minutes* captioned this stance as “Parmesan Patriotism.”

With heightened sanctions after the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Russians may need to turn more and more to *kvas*. There is a patriotic connection even in the making of *kvas*, since in a self-sufficient domestic economy nothing should go to waste. Salvaging remaining bits of leftover bread—bread that throughout Russian history has superstitiously never been discarded with the trash even when old and dried—becomes a positive good, a recycling into a patriotic beverage that asserts superiority over the foreign rather than a case of substitution due to political and economic isolation.

The tortured question whether Russia would be better without Western influence, and whether such a view is indeed truly or mistakenly patriotic, continues today. In this ongoing debate, the symbol of *kvas*—accessible, mundane, popular, thirst-quenching, and essentially Russian—has been used by the proponents of different sides. No one disputes its deep “Russianness,” but how that Russianness is to be regarded vis-à-vis the rest of the world remains unclear.

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Biography

Angela Brintlinger is Professor of Russian Literature and Culture at Ohio State University. She has published two monographs, *Writing a Usable Past: Russian Literary Culture, 1917-1937*, about the genre of biography, and *Chapaev and his Comrades: War and the Russian Literary Hero across the Twentieth Century*, as well as four edited collections, including *Seasoned Socialism: Gender*

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Appendices

Appendix I: Antiokh Kantemir from *Sobranie stikhotvorenii*

A:

Дети наши, что пред тем, тихи и покорны,
Праотческим шли следом к божией проворны
Службе, с страхом слушая, что сами не знали,
Теперь, к церкви соблазну, библию честь стали;
Толкуют, всему хотят знать повод, причину,
Мало веры подая священному чину;
Потеряли добрый нрав, забыли пить квасу,
Не прибьешь их палкою к соленому мясу;
Уже свечек не кладут, постных дней не знают;
Мирскую в церковных власть руках лишну чают (58).

B:

«Учение, — говорит, — нам голод наводит;
Живали мы преж сего, не зная латыне,
Гораздо обильнее, чем мы живем ныне;
Гораздо в невежестве больше хлеба жали;
Переняв чужой язык, свой хлеб потеряли (58).

C:

«Люди мы к сообществу божия тварь стали,
Не в нашу пользу одну смысла дар прияли. [...]
В веселье, в пирах мы жизнь должны провождати:
И так она недолга — на что коротати,
Крушиться над книгою и повреждать очи?
Не лучше ли с кубком дни прогулять и ночи?
Вино — дар божественный, много в нем провору:
Дружит людей, подает повод к разговору,
Веселит, все тяжкие мысли отымает,
Скудость знает облегчать, слабых ободряет [...] (59).

Appendix II: Vasily Trediakovsky from *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (English translations in the body text are by the current article's author)

A:

Счастлив! в мире без сует живущий,
Как в златый век, да и без врагов;
Плугом отческим поля орющий,
А к тому ж без всяких и долгов (192).

B:

Осень как плодом обогатится,
Много яблок, груш и много слив;
О! как полным сердцем веселится,
Их величину, их зря налив (193).

C:

Весь некупленный обед готовит,
Смотрит, пища чтоб вкусна была,
Из живых птиц на жаркое ловит,
И другое строит для стола (194).

D:

Каплуны прочь, птицы африкански,
Что и избрел роскошный смак;
Прочь бургонски вина и шампански,
Дале прочь и ты, густой понтак.

Сытны токмо щи, ломть мягкий хлеба,
Молодой барашек иногда;
Все же в дому, в чем вся его потреба,
В праздник пиво пьет, а квас всегда (195).

Appendix III: Derzhavin from *Poetic Works: A Bilingual Album*

A:

Блажен! – кто, удалясь от дел,
Подобно смертным первородым,
Орет отеческий удел
Не откупным трудом, -- свободным,
На собственных своих волах (356).

B:

Бьет полдня час, рабы служить к столу бегут;
Идет за трапезу гостей хозяйка с хором –
Я озреваю стол, -- и вижу разных блюд
Цветник, поставленный узором.

Багряна ветчина, зелены щи с желтком,
Румяно-желт пирог, сыр белый, раки красны,
Что смоль, янтарь-икра, и с голубым пером
Там щука пестрая – прекрасны!

Прекрасны потому, что взор манят мой, вкус;
Но не обилием иль чуждых стран приправой:
А что опрятно все и представляет Русь:
Припас домашний, свежий, здоровой (379-80).

C:

Блажен, кто менее зависит от людей,
Свободен от долгов и от хлопот приказных,
Не ищет при дворе ни злата, ни честей
И чужд сует разнообразных!
Зачем же в Петрополь на вольну ехать страсть,
С пространства в тесноту, с свободы за затворы,
Под бремя роскоши, богатств, сирен под власть
И пред вельможей пышны взоры?
Возможно ли сравнять что с вольностью златой,

С уединением и тишиной на Званке?
Довольство, здравие, согласие с женой,
Покой мне нужен – дней в останке (376).

Appendix IV: Pyotr Viazemsky from *Stikhotvoreniia*

А:
Голодный, стол окинув взглядом,
И видя в разных племенах
Живой обед со мною рядом
На двух и четырех ногах,
Голодный, видя к злой обиде,
Как по ногам моим со сна,
С испуга, в первобытном виде
Семейно жметса ветчина,
Я не грущу: пусть квас и молод,
А хлеб немного пожилой,
Я убаюкиваю голод
Надеждой, памяти сестрой.
Постясь за полдником крестьянским,
Отрадно мне себе сказать:
Я трюфли запивал шампанским,
Бог даст, и буду запивать (178-179).