This is an excellent book from the head of the Department of the Moscow’s Research Institute of Psychiatry, and a leading alcohol researcher. He focuses on the period 1950–2000 when the modern pattern of excessive drinking took shape and finally got totally out of hand. Over centuries, Russia has been seen as a country where drunkenness was prevalent but this view is misleading reflecting impressions gained largely by visitors to the Russian cities and describing the behaviour of the elite. The peasants over the centuries drank relatively little. Nonetheless, when the Soviet revolution of 1917 occurred one of the first measures of the fledgling government was to introduce prohibition; a measure which was short-lived partly because of the resultant drop in much needed tax revenue.

He points out that data from the Soviets is hard to interpret because from the mid-1930s epidemiological work in the Social Sciences came under attack for political reasons. Statistics on the consumption of alcohol and the impact of alcohol were not readily available. There was a sharp drop in the number of publications, and until the start of the anti-alcohol campaign in 1985 very little work on alcohol-related problems ever saw the light of day.

A substantial increase in alcohol consumption during the Soviet era took place after the Second World War. The level of consumption was twice as high in 1980 as it was in 1960. There then followed a period of stagnation while alcohol misuse continued to rise, and the mortality rates for alcohol soared and life expectancy declined.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev took steps to reduce the level of alcohol consumption introducing a rise in the price of vodka, the closing of vodka distilleries, the uprooting of century-old vines in Georgia and indeed semi-prohibition. Although this well-known policy did have beneficial effects on health, the levels of violent crime and anti-social behaviour in Russia rose and it was undermined partly by a lack of public support, loss of revenues and by the growth of availability of illicit spirits ‘samogon’.

Following the break-up of the Union, Russia entered a period of economic difficulties, with privatization and the development of an oligarchic bureaucratic form of capitalism. The gulf between the rich and the poor widened appreciably, and the levels of public dissatisfaction grew. Nemtsov concludes a free market is necessary for the balancing of supply and demand, but a balance that endangers the health and lives of the population demands administrative anti-market measures. This feedback mechanism of controls has been lacking in Russia.

In this book, he draws on a wealth of research experience and skillfully integrates the socio-political upheavals that have characterized Russia in the last 50 years: the waves of excessive drinking followed by somewhat draconian and ill-prepared policies of harm reduction, leading to the present situation where drink is still ubiquitous and a major problem. There are some signs of realization that this state of affairs cannot continue but Nemtsov seems largely pessimistic about the prospects of significant change. The lessons in this fascinating book are for all interested in alcohol policy and the need to help the State distance itself from an over-reliance on revenues from alcohol, or allowing the drinks industries a free hand in dictating availability and price.

Congratulations also to the Södertörns University in Sweden for making this book available and for an excellent introduction by Denny Vägerö.