Tea Consumers, Tea Trade, and Colonial Cultivation

by Thomas Breed

At first glance, tea hardly seems a necessity. But to many Europeans of the early modern period, it was an attractive enough commodity to draw them around the world to China, and attractive enough to motivate them to attempt to grow it themselves in their various colonies. The English, Dutch, and Russians consumed the beverage in mass quantities, and all of them followed this pattern.

Europe was introduced to tea during the early 17th century. The first printed mention of it is even earlier, in 1550, in the *Navigazione e Viaggi* by Gian Battista Ramusio of Venice, who describes it as Chai Catai, or tea of China (*Britannica* 738). The first ship known to have brought tea to Europe was possibly Dutch, and arrived circa 1610 from Macao (Toussaint 597). The first Englishman to write about tea was R. L. Wickham of the East India Company in 1615, in a letter from Japan (*Britannica* 738). The first Russian source describes a caravan carrying tea in 1618 (Toussaint 601).


Tea did not begin as a necessity for England, though it quickly became one. It was first imported as an exotic medicine, then was promoted as a safe alternative to gin, and finally as a mass consumed product (Schirokauer 388). It was first sold in London at Garway’s Coffee House in 1657 (*Britannica* 738). Not much later, Oliver Cromwell began taxing tea (Toussaint 597). Eventually, tea came to account for a tenth of the British tax income, and henceforth became a drink of national importance not only culturally but also politically. Culturally, tea became a staple. Britain imported 15 million pounds of tea annually (Schirokauer 388). Consumption had increased 200 fold from 1700 to 1750, though this increase only includes tea which was actually taxed. Smuggling was rampant, both for the sake of profit and as a political protest (Schivelbusch 79-80).

A more explosive protest resulted in the 18th century when parliament, in order to help the East India Company overcome financial difficulties, allowed them to bypass American middlemen and sell large quantities of Chinese tea directly to American distributors. The ensuing uproar contributed to the American Revolution (Palmer 341-42).
The Netherlands also imported large amounts of tea. By 1770, they imported two thirds as much as Britain (Toussaint 598). Besides Britain, Holland was the only West European country to popularly consume tea (Ibid 597). Dutch ships competed with British to bring tea the most quickly from China to Europe in the “Tea Race.” This was not only important from the standpoint of sportsmanship, but also for the quality of the tea. The longer it remained on a ship, the more likely it was to be spoiled (Ibid 598). This led the British and Dutch to consider importing their tea by land across Russia. The Russian tariffs made the tea too expensive, however, and the scheme was abandoned (Ottuv 853).

The most notable difference between the West European and Russian tea trades was the means of transport. Russian tea was brought by caravan. The earliest official record of tea being drunk was in 1638, by Tsar Mikhail Fyodorovich, the first of the Romanovs. He received it as a gift from a Mongol Tsar. In 1679, a trade agreement was established between Russia and China to regularize the tea trade. Following this, both the amount of tea imported and consumed increased dramatically (Bol’shaya 11). Most of this tea was brought by caravan. This resulted in better tasting tea, according to the Dictionnarie de Cuisine, which identified St. Petersburg and Moscow teas as the best (Toussaint 601).
As an alternative to buying it from China, all three countries sought to grow their own tea. In Britain’s case, tea caused a massive trade imbalance, in which British exports to China equaled only one tenth of the cost of tea imported (Schirokauer 389). Presumably, the Netherlands suffered similarly. After the mid-eighteenth century, the Russians were able to better penetrate the Chinese market with sea otter pelts, allowing them to avoid such trade imbalances (Bobrick 220). Russia was unable to satisfy its demand for tea through the caravan trade alone, however, and was forced to buy tea from British ships (Ottuv 852). Eventually, they also tried to grow their own tea.

All three countries could have solved their problem by simply raising the price of tea. In Britain and the Netherlands, this would have paid for its extra cost, while in Russia, this would have been a natural reaction to an insufficient supply. But in all three countries, mass consumption was considered preferable to allowing tea to become a luxury item. As a result, the search for cheaper places to grow tea began.

The Dutch grew their own tea in Indonesia. By 1892, the majority of their tea was imported from Java (Ottuv 852). In 1826, J.I.L.L. Jacobson had smuggled tea out of China, and established its cultivation in the Dutch East Indies (Britannica 738).

The British centered their tea production in India. In 1823, tea was discovered growing in northern India, but the British did not organize its cultivation until 1834, under the direction of Governor General Lord William Henry Cavendish (Britannica 738). By the 1880s, Indian tea supplanted Chinese tea in the British market (Ottuv 852). Soon afterwards, Indian tea was the most popular tea everywhere, except in Arabia, which continued purchasing Chinese tea (Toussaint 598). The British success depended on the more efficient usage of fertilizers and labor (Schirokauer 457).

Russia had also begun to cultivate tea in its colonies. In 1814, N.A. Garvis attempted growing it in the Crimea, but failed. In 1847, in Ozurgeti, now in southwestern Georgia, teas was successfully grown. Soon after, its cultivation began in other Russian regions of the Caucasus (Bol’shaya 11).
Tea was also cultivated in other parts of the world. Experiments in Africa, South America, and California ensued during the second half of the 19th century. (Ottuv 852). In 1890, tea was cultivated for a short time in South Carolina (Americana 341).

In conclusion, the difficulties of importing tea from China to Europe led the importers to begin growing tea in other parts of the world. In Britain and probably the Netherlands, cost was the primary factor, while in Russia it was availability. In all three countries, the mass appeal of tea demanded that a solution, other than simply raising its price, be found. In all three countries, the solution adopted was its cultivation in their warmer colonies. While tea is not a necessity of life, its appeal to consumers and their influence decided the course taken by both business and government. From that standpoint, the trade in tea can be seen as a marker between the modern and premodern worlds.

Bibliography

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