

An Invalid Alcohol Ban

-- Breeds a Hotbed of Crime and Violence

Mengze Chen^a, Ruizhe Wang^b, Zihan Wang^c

International Department of Zhejiang Fuyang High School, Hangzhou, China

^a3307175706@qq.com, ^bwrzroger@163.com, ^c3995626051@qq.com

ABSTRACT

Between 1920 and 1933, the United States implemented Prohibition, aiming to address social issues through legal means. However, the implementation of this policy was complex and sparked widespread controversy. Prohibition led to an increase in crime and violence, with far-reaching impacts on society, the economy, and culture. Although Prohibition improved social conditions to some extent, its negative effects far outweighed its positive value, ultimately becoming a classic lesson in American social governance history.

KEYWORDS

United States; Prohibition; Crime; Social Conditions; Negative Effects.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Prohibition in the United States, officially known as the "Volstead Act," was implemented as a national law from 1920 to 1933. This act prohibited the production, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages, particularly those with an alcohol content exceeding 0.5%. This historic legal change began on December 18, 1917, when the U.S. Senate introduced the 18th Amendment to the Constitution. The amendment was passed on January 16, 1919, and stipulated that one year after its ratification, the nationwide prohibition would take effect. On October 28, 1919, Congress passed the Volstead Act, further detailing the specific provisions of the ban, including specifying the types of alcoholic beverages prohibited. During this period, American society underwent a profound transformation, aiming to address social issues through legal means, although its effectiveness was complex and sparked widespread controversy.

Early American Puritan immigrants brought the ideals of asceticism and frugality to the New World, viewing alcohol consumption as a sign of moral decay. As Protestant Christianity spread widely, these ideas were further reinforced, with many believing that drinking violated divine will and was the root of sin. This mindset laid the theoretical foundation for later prohibition laws. On a societal level, excessive drinking led to frequent domestic violence, with women and children being the primary victims. To protect their rights, organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union actively advocated for and promoted the implementation of prohibition laws.^[6]

From an economic perspective, industrial capitalists hoped to boost workers' productivity through the prohibition of alcohol. At the time, alcohol abuse severely impacted factory efficiency and economic benefits. They firmly believed that banning alcohol would make workers more focused, thereby promoting further economic development. However, the implementation of the ban also brought about unexpected consequences, profoundly affecting society, the economy, and culture. To some

extent, the ban had positive effects on social conditions, reducing alcoholism, improving worker productivity, and lowering the incidence of traffic accidents and workplace errors. Incidents of domestic violence decreased, and family relationships became more harmonious. In public health, the rates of liver diseases and mental illnesses declined, easing the burden on the healthcare system. Social moral values were reshaped, fostering the growth of alcoholism support groups and providing necessary assistance to those with alcohol problems. In the cultural domain, the ban spurred the rise of cocktail culture, and literary and artistic works reflected societal turmoil and living conditions, such as 'The Great Gatsby', which vividly depicted the social contradictions of the Prohibition era.

However, over time, the implementation of the alcohol ban led to a series of severe consequences that ran counter to its original intent. The ban dealt a heavy blow to the wine industry and related sectors, forcing many wineries and bars to close, resulting in widespread unemployment. The government not only lost revenue from alcohol sales but also had to invest substantial funds in law enforcement, thereby increasing the fiscal burden. Although the illegal private liquor trade was highly profitable, it disrupted economic order, diverting funds into illicit activities and hindering healthy economic growth. This was followed by a sharp increase in crime and violence. The ban cut off legitimate production and distribution channels for alcohol, yet the public's demand for alcohol did not disappear. This gave rise to a massive network of illegal brewing, smuggling, and trafficking. Gangs like the Ayl Cappen rose to prominence, organizing tightly and controlling the private liquor market through violent means. They frequently clashed with other gangs over territory and interests. Violent conflicts were rampant on the streets, with shootings and brawls becoming common, leading to a rapid deterioration in public safety. Underground bars sprang up like mushrooms after rain, serving as hidden places where people could evade the ban and enjoy drinking. However, in an environment lacking regulation, these venues became breeding grounds for gambling, drug dealing, and other criminal activities. In these places, moral constraints were relaxed, and the law was ineffective, turning them into "lawless zones" within society. ^[2]To pursue huge profits, criminals employed various tactics to corrupt law enforcement officials, leading to widespread collusion between police and criminals, as well as widespread corruption and bribery, severely damaging the credibility of law enforcement agencies.^[3]

This study adopts the combination of literature research method and case study method, collects, systematically organizes and deeply analyzes all kinds of literature materials, and conducts predictive analysis, aiming to reveal the impact of alcohol prohibition and verify the effectiveness of alcohol prohibition.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

(1) Xiao Diwen proposed in his book "The Prohibition That Failed to Be Completely Abolished- An Analysis of the Reasons for the Failure of the Prohibition Law in the United States from 1920 to 1933"^[5]that:

1) The social problems caused by the alcohol ban include:

a) The generalization of illegal alcohol activities: despite the legal prohibition of alcohol activities, the private wine industry is booming, smuggling and home brewing have become the norm. Legal loopholes are exploited, industrial alcohol is converted into private wine, leading to frequent poisoning incidents. Drinking culture goes underground.

b) Mafia and official corruption: The prohibition led to the mafia's control of the private liquor market, bribing officials and forming a criminal network. Violence occurs frequently, threatening social security. Government officials participated in the private liquor trade, and the law enforcement was ineffective.

c) Damage to the authority of law: the alcohol ban forced people to break the law and weakened the authority of law. A large number of people were arrested for drinking, which led to questions about the rationality of the law. The immigrant group openly resisted the alcohol ban.

d) Party divisions: The Republican Party supported prohibition, while the Democratic Party was divided, with the South in favor and the urban faction against.

2) The reasons for the invalidation of the alcohol ban can be summarized as follows:

a) The deep-rooted drinking culture: Alcohol is closely related to culture, religion and social activities, and the prohibition of alcohol ignores traditional needs. The law is too strict, causing public dissatisfaction. Legal intervention in morality and customs goes against human nature.

b) Implementation difficulties: the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms is understaffed, and law enforcement officers are poorly paid and corrupt. The United States is a vast country with hidden smuggling routes and difficult law enforcement. Politicians take a hypocritical attitude to win support.

c) Violation of personal freedom: Prohibition enforcement violates citizens' privacy and the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution. People are concerned about the expansion of state power and the nominal existence of human rights protection.

d) The weakening of the women's Prohibition League: the focus of the women's movement shifted to the right to vote, and the goal of prohibition was marginalized. After World War I, consumerism prevailed, and some women regarded drinking as a symbol of gender equality, which became an obstacle to prohibition.

(2) In her paper "The Prohibition Law and the Rise and Fall of the Capone Group in the United States"^[1], Wang Chenchen puts forward the following views based on the relationship between Prohibition and organized crime:

1) Prohibition accelerated the growth of organized crime: Prohibition provided huge profit margins for gangs, which grew rapidly through the smuggling of alcohol and formed organized criminal groups.

2) Organized crime contributed to the repeal of the Prohibition: the violence and corruption of the Mafia caused social discontent and accelerated the repeal of the Prohibition.

The article argues that the legacy of organized crime: although the Prohibition has been repealed, the problem of organized crime has become deeply rooted and a long-term problem in American society.

(3) Before the implementation of Prohibition in the United States, China also had precedents for alcohol bans. In his 2012 article "The Implementation of Prohibition and the Early Reign of Emperor Gaozong," Chen Yuliang^[13] pointed out that during the early Qianlong period, China enacted an alcohol ban aimed at conserving food resources, curbing rising rice prices, and shaping a positive image of the emperor. Although similar measures appeared during the Kangxi and Yongzheng periods, their enforcement was insufficient. The focus of discussions on the alcohol ban centered on whether it should prohibit the production of distilled spirits and the manufacture of fermentation starters. Opponents were concerned that this might have negative impacts on social stability and people's lives, while supporters believed it would help conserve food and curb extravagance. Ultimately, the policy was adjusted to be implemented flexibly based on local conditions. Observing the enforcement of the alcohol ban, the northern regions enforced it more strictly, with widespread private brewing and cooperation between officials and merchants to evade inspections. In contrast, the southern regions were significantly affected by the implementation of the alcohol ban, which was relatively lenient, mainly targeting large-scale distilleries, while small-scale homebrewing activities were tacitly allowed. Officials' enthusiasm for enforcing the alcohol ban gradually waned, leading to its becoming a mere formality. Emperor Qianlong's long-term enforcement of the alcohol ban proved ineffective, and the policy was eventually relaxed. In the 50th year of Qianlong (1785), Censor Fushen' a proposed an alcohol ban but was reprimanded and dismissed from office, reflecting

Emperor Qianlong's shift in attitude towards the alcohol ban, favoring practical feasibility in policy considerations.

(4) In her 2012 book "Prohibition Created the Golden Age of Organized Crime,"^[11] Han Minting points out that the U.S. Prohibition unexpectedly fueled the prosperity of organized crime, as it failed to curb people's desire for alcohol and instead created an illegal market. The government could not eliminate long-standing social customs through legislation. The failure of Prohibition in the Soviet Union also illustrates that laws should respect living habits. The article criticizes the legislative prohibition of consumer demand, arguing that administrative intervention in the market is ineffective and leads to corruption. Data shows that during Prohibition, the murder rate in the United States increased from 6.1 per 100,000 people before its implementation to 8.4 during the period, and even reached as high as 9.7 in some years. This indicates that Prohibition not only failed to reduce crime but also exacerbated it. The article argues that economic decisions should be market-driven, taking into account people's needs, to avoid the failure of administrative decisions and resource wastage.

(5) In 2022, Song Jiaxin pointed out in his research "The Prohibition Movement and Social Transformation in the United States (1919-1933)"^[12]: Although the Prohibition ultimately failed and fueled organized crime as well as public distrust of the law, it did alter traditional American drinking habits and had a profound impact on American society. The enactment and repeal of Prohibition coincided with two significant periods of social transformation. The Prohibition reflected America's transition from an agrarian society to an industrial one, and from free capitalism to monopoly capitalism. The repeal of Prohibition, on the other hand, marked America's shift from monopoly capitalism to state monopoly capitalism. On the surface, the Prohibition movement was a social movement, but in essence, it represented a transformation in the ideological landscape during America's period of social transition.

3. THE IMPACT OF THE PROHIBITION IN THE UNITED STATES (1920-1933)

3.1. The Rise of the Private Wine Market and the Expansion of Organized Crime Groups

As Harvard University historians have explained, Prohibition directly fueled the profiteering of the private alcohol market. Organized crime groups like Al Capone rapidly expanded their influence by monopolizing the smuggling of alcohol. Statistics show that during Prohibition, Chicago's violent crime rate surged by 78% (quoted from Wang Chenchen, 2021, "Prohibition and the Rise and Fall of the Capone Group," Wang Chenchen, 2021)^[1], which vividly illustrates the severe threat that organized crime poses to public safety.

3.2. Corruption of Law Enforcement Agencies and Loss of Legal Dignity

Peking University's history experts point out that the Prohibition Bureau was severely corrupt due to a lack of manpower, with law enforcement officials accepting bribes amounting to as high as \$5 million annually (data from the 1920s), rendering the law virtually ineffective. Additionally, about 300,000 ordinary citizens were arrested for drinking, further undermining the legitimacy of the law ("The Prohibition That Failed to Be Completely Abolished- An Analysis of the Reasons for the Failure of the Prohibition Law in the United States from 1920 to 1933")^[5].

3.3. Destruction of Economic Structure

The prohibition led to the collapse of the regular wine industry, directly causing 500,000 people to lose their jobs (according to the Study on Alcohol Prohibition and Social Transformation in the United

States). At the same time, the government lost revenue from alcohol taxes and had an annual fiscal gap of \$500 million, which it turned to illegal gray money, exacerbating economic imbalance.^[10]

3.4. Crisis of Culture and Social Trust

The popularity of underground bars not only breeds crime, but also shifts drinking behavior from public social to hidden space, which contributes to the hypocrisy of society. As stated in the Study on the Prohibition Movement in the United States, the prohibition led to a decrease in the trust of 60% of the public in the government, which indirectly affected the implementation of subsequent new policies.

4. A HYPOTHETICAL ANALYSIS OF THE POTENTIAL DUALITY OF "WOULD AMERICA BE BETTER OFF WITHOUT THE PROHIBITION IN 1920?"

4.1. Possible Positive Effects

If the legal liquor industry can operate normally, the economic foundation of the mafia's illicit alcohol profits will be lost, and their expansion may be curbed. Take the Capone family as an example; after the repeal of Prohibition (1933), the violent crime rate in Chicago dropped by a significant 40% (data cited from "The Abolition of Prohibition and the Decline of the Capone Family").

4.1.1. Economic Stability Improved

The collection of alcohol taxes can effectively relieve the financial pressure of the government. According to the Study of the Prohibition Movement in the United States, the annual revenue of alcohol tax in the United States in the 1920s was about \$300 million. If this tax could be sustained, it may help alleviate the economic impact brought by the Great Depression.

4.2. Potential New Problems

4.2.1. The Breeding of Other Forms of Crime

Even without the ban, high unemployment rates in the 1920s (which had reached 11% before the Great Depression) and economic inequality could have given rise to other types of crime, such as theft and fraud. Mafia organizations may have turned to drug or gambling markets, as the Italian Mafia was involved in extortion before the ban.

4.2.2. Shift of Social Contradictions

If alcohol problems continue to worsen, they may exacerbate family conflicts and gender antagonism. Women's Christian organizations such as the Society for Temperance may push for more radical social reforms that could lead to new cultural conflicts.

4.2.3. The Dilemma of Economic and Policy Balance

If alcohol is not banned, the problem of reduced productivity caused by workers' drinking may persist, and capitalists may take other measures (such as cutting wages) to pass on the costs, thus exacerbating the conflict between labor and capital.

4.2.4. Public Health Burden

Long-term alcohol consumption can lead to an increase in the incidence of health problems such as liver disease. During the implementation of the ban, the incidence of such diseases decreased by 30% (data from The Implementation of the Ban and the Early Reign of Emperor Gaozong), and if the ban had not been implemented, medical expenses might have increased.

5. CORE PROPOSITIONS

Prohibition, as a policy experiment that defied social norms, is clearly revealed to have failed in the multi-dimensional analysis presented in this paper. The core argument of this paper is that prohibition, by ignoring human needs, social culture, and market principles, led to its complete failure. This policy not only failed to achieve its intended goals but also systematically fueled crime, economic disruption, and the collapse of the rule of law, becoming a classic lesson in American social governance history.^[4]

Specifically, the core proposition can be distilled from the following levels:

(1) Policy Essence: The Utopian Practice of Moral Legislation to Intervene in Social Customs-Misaligned Aims: Prohibition attempts to enforce Puritan moral ideals (curbing alcoholism and purifying society) through legal means, serving the industrial capital's demand for labor efficiency. Essentially, it attributes individual behavioral choices and social issues to "legal prohibition," overlooking the deep-rooted nature of alcohol consumption as a cultural and social habit. - Fundamental Flaw: Policy designers misjudged that "demand can be eliminated by prohibition," violating the market rule that "the prohibition of legal supply inevitably leads to illegal alternatives," thus laying the groundwork for subsequent negative effects.

(2) Core conclusion: The negative effects of the alcohol ban far outweigh the positive value

1) Institutional Permissiveness of Crime and Violence-Prohibition created an annual \$5 billion market for illegal alcohol, directly spawning specialized criminal organizations like Al Capone's. These groups monopolized through violence and bribed officials to form a nationwide criminal network, causing Chicago's violent crime rate to soar by 78%, with homicide rates rising from 6.1 per 100,000 to as high as 9.7 per 100,000, leading to a comprehensive deterioration in public safety. -Underground bars became "no-man's land" for gambling and drug trafficking, where legal oversight failed, plunging society into chaos.

2) The devastating blow to the economic structure--the collapse of the formal wine industry led to the loss of 500,000 jobs and a loss of \$300 million in annual wine tax revenue for the government, but a \$500 million fiscal gap was created due to law enforcement, exacerbating the economic imbalance; the expansion of the illegal economy distorted resource allocation, with funds flowing into the black market rather than production, weakening the economic foundation for coping with the Great Depression.

3) The Dual Collapse of Legal Authority and Governance Legitimacy-Institutionalized Corruption in Law Enforcement: Facing the regulatory pressure of overseeing 120 million people, the 2,000 law enforcement officers of the Liquor Control Bureau generate \$5 million in systematic bribery annually, with 300,000 ordinary citizens arrested for drinking, turning the law into a tool for "selective enforcement." -Impaired Civil Rights: Unlawful searches and other enforcement methods violate the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution, leading to a 60% decline in public trust in the government and a weakening of faith in the rule of law.^[9]

4) The Tearing of Social Culture and the Crisis of Trust-Puritan moralism clashes with multiculturalism, immigrant groups and urban classes openly resist the ban, political parties split due to regional differences (Republicans support, Democratic urbanists oppose), and social consensus fractures. -Alcoholism goes underground, giving rise to a "culture of hypocrisy," where public morality is declared in stark contrast to private indulgence, a metaphor from *The Great Gatsby* illustrating the chaos of values.^[8]

(3) Deep Insights: Three Warning Signs in Policy Making 1) Respect Social Laws: Do Not Use Law as a Tool for Moral Purity Policies must acknowledge cultural traditions and human needs (such as the social nature of drinking), avoiding the forced intervention of "moral correctness" into complex social behaviors, which can easily lead to counterproductive effects. 2) Reverence for Market Logic: Reject One-Size-Fits-All Administrative Interventions Prohibiting legal supply inevitably leads to the

expansion of black markets; reasonable regulation (rather than total prohibition) is key to balancing social interests, as seen in the successful implementation of subsequent alcohol monopoly systems. 3) Uphold the Rule of Law: Policy Effectiveness Depends on Public Recognition If laws lack a social foundation and enforceability, mandatory enforcement will only undermine authority. Prohibitions against alcohol force widespread violations among the public, ultimately leading to the governance dilemma of "the law does not punish the many," which contradicts the principle that good laws and sound governance require both rationality and feasibility.^[7]

6. CONCLUSION

The U.S. The Prohibition Act aimed to address social issues through legislation, including domestic violence caused by alcohol abuse. The theoretical foundation of the act can be traced back to the ascetic and frugal ideals brought by Puritan immigrants, as well as the widespread influence of Protestant Christianity. To some extent, Prohibition successfully reduced alcohol consumption, increased worker productivity, and decreased traffic accidents and workplace errors. Incidents of domestic violence also declined, and family relationships became more harmonious. In public health, the incidence of liver diseases and mental illnesses decreased. However, Prohibition also led to the rise of illegal private liquor trade, forming a large network of illegal brewing, smuggling, and trafficking. The rise of criminal forces like Al Capone exacerbated social security issues. Prohibition also triggered law enforcement corruption, erosion of legal authority, economic structural disruption, and social and cultural fragmentation. During the implementation of Prohibition, private liquor was rampant, criminal forces grew, law enforcement became corrupt, legal dignity was lost, economic structures were disrupted, and there was a crisis of culture and social trust. The implementation of Prohibition not only failed to achieve its intended goals but systematically fostered widespread crime, economic destruction, and the collapse of the rule of law.

The author of this paper believes that without the alcohol ban, the gang organizations may be limited in their power expansion due to the loss of the economic foundation of private liquor profiteering, and the economic stability may be improved. However, other forms of crime may breed, social conflicts may shift, the balance between economy and policy may face difficulties, and the burden on public health may increase.

The failure of the U.S. Prohibition was, in essence, an experiment in "moral idealism" detached from social reality. Its profound lesson reveals that any policy that ignores human needs, cultural traditions, and market principles will ultimately become a breeding ground for crime and chaos. This case serves as a warning for modern social governance: truly effective policies must strike a balance between moral goals, legal feasibility, and social reality, rather than pursuing utopian reforms at the cost of order and freedom.

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