

Down on the Farm

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A collective dairy farm in the Soviet Union

In a world of dwindling resources it is not surprising that the problem of agricultural output represents the greatest economic threat to the Soviet Union. Faced with an agriculture that cannot meet its expanding needs, the Soviets have been desperately searching the world market. It is probably little remembered that widespread famine in the early 20's would have nearly destroyed the budding Communist state but for massive aid from abroad, especially from the United States.

New Economic Policy. Stalin's massive NEP plans for industrialization did not tend to improve the state of Soviet agriculture; rather they neglected it. In effect, Stalin had reduced the Soviet people to the level of prisoners in one vast labor camp. Stalin's dreams were immense and included grandiose schemes to transform nature by diverting great rivers, by planting millions of acres of forest belts in arid steppe region, and by creating massive irrigation

systems to feed new farmlands. Yet, they were only dreams and nothing more.

In early 1950, only vaguely aware of the incredible agricultural plight of his nation, (a plight which according to international standards rated the USSR as a poor, underdeveloped nation), Stalin was open to accepting a new plan. That plan was promulgated by Nikita Khrushchev, then overlord for Soviet agriculture.

Using the opportunity to expand his own base of power, Khrushchev personally conducted and publicized in an unprecedented manner his new plan. Essentially it called for centralization of collected farms to the extent of amalgamating smaller farms into huge "kolkhozes." By June 1950, the number of collectives in Moscow province had been reduced from 6069 when the program had begun to 1668; the process spread throughout the length and breadth of the Soviet Union. Calling his program the "New Lands" program, Khrushchev had gambled on major programs such as extensive sowing of corn and the plowing of huge tracts of land to boost agricultural output.

Power scheme

The intent of Khrushchev was first and foremost power. Aware of Stalin's dreams and of his position to flatter Stalin, Khrushchev's policies were unrealistic at the least.

By the spring of 1951, the failure of his program was becoming evident, and Khrushchev was at last ousted from his position. Later, in 1955, Khrushchev, now First Secretary of the Party, opened with a new plan, to be called the "Virgin Lands" plan. This colossal plan called for over 6 million acres of land in Siberia and Kazakhstan to be ploughed and sown in spring wheat. By the end of 1955, the acreage was to be increased to 32 million acres. It is difficult to visualize such large amounts of acreage. Thirty-two million acres was more than three times the acreage under cultivation in the Soviet Union on the eve of

Lenin's collectivization. It was equal to the combined cultivated areas of Britain, France, and Spain.

Initially the program was a success. The harvest of 1954 was a limited victory, one which Khrushchev used quite well to gain greater power. But the success did not last; harvest failures and dust storms contributed heavily to its defeat. By 1961, the Virgin Lands program was receiving little mention or attention. In 1963, the program suffered a massive harvest failure, forcing Khrushchev to make the first great deal with the United States. This failure spelled the end for the Virgin Lands program, and indeed, was heavily influential in toppling Khrushchev himself. In October of the following year, Khrushchev was deposed.

Investments increase

The Brezhnev-Kosygin leadership began its tenure with a promise to bring a better deal to Soviet society. A substantial increase in agricultural investment gave new promise. From a previous level of 43 billion rubles, investment was raised to 71 billion and has been steadily rising since.

As a result, more sophisticated machinery and irrigation along with increased peasant incomes and favorable weather provided the Soviet Union from 1966-70 with five years of successful harvests. But the much learned adage in the West that money is not everything is now being understood in the Soviet Union. Allocable resources are growing increasingly short, and the stifling framework of Lenin's collective farms are taking their toll. Lack of proper distribution in a centralized bureaucracy have created massive shortages of machinery and fertilizers.

At present about 30 million adults are engaged in agriculture, a third of the labor force. They produce to the point of scant sufficiency for a growing population. In the United States about 3.4 million adults are engaged in agriculture, about 4.5 percent of the labor force, producing excesses for a burgeoning population. Stated in slightly different terms, one American farm worker provides high-quality products for 60 people, in addition to exporting 20 percent of what he produces. One Soviet farm worker provides low quality products for approximately eight people and manages to export two percent of his production. Despite over 40 years of collectivization, the most productive plots are those that are privately owned. Private plots account for only three percent of the cultivated land. Yet they provide Soviet consumers with 63 percent of their potatoes, 41 percent of available vegetables, almost 40 percent of the meat and milk products, 63 percent of their eggs, and 30 percent of their wool.

In addition to the incredible inefficiency of the collective farm, a vast, bureaucratic sea has swallowed up massive amounts of machinery, diverting it to industry and leaving Soviet agriculture largely unmechanized. Estimates of agriculture performed by hand reach up to 90 percent in some areas of the Soviet Union.

Revamped plan. In the midst of the debacle, Mr. Brezhnev recently revealed a vast agricultural development project on the order of Khrushchev's "Virgin Lands" project. The five-year plan will cost an estimated \$44 billion and will, according to Brezhnev, "transform a vast area in the center of our country and speed the further growth of the entire national economy."

It seems highly ironic that Dr. Brezhnev is now extolling the very program for which, in 1964, he had criticized and toppled Khrushchev. He is now faced with a desperate need for resources and hoping for international support to open the Siberian area. There is little doubt that this plan takes on the air of being an emerging project. Much of its success depends upon detente, and Mr. Brezhnev knows that it is a costly gamble. That same gamble failed for Khrushchev. Yet despite these costly programs, the sacrosanct collective farm goes on. The Kremlin, not willing to scrap a concept of the "great Lenin," remains blinded to economic truths.