

# Soviet Stomach Trouble

The Economist, March 19, 1955

FREQUENT alarms and disputes, abrupt changes of prescriptions and errors of doctors have made it plain that something is seriously wrong with the stomach on which the Soviet system marches—that is, with Soviet agriculture. Since Stalin's death, the absorption of quantities of Argentine, Danish and Dutch foodstuffs by an economy body quite unaccustomed to such external supplies has caught the world's eye (for a time Russia was the third largest importer of meat and dairy produce); and the linking of Mr. Malenkov's agricultural "sins" to his deposition, followed by the dismissal of ministers concerned with food and farming, has heightened the sense of drama. Against this background, the orders which Mr. Khrushchev issued last week for the decentralising of agricultural planning have been interpreted in some quarters as a prelude to the

winding up of the whole Soviet system of farming.

Undoubtedly the countryside is always the Achilles heel of the Soviet regime. The country is as vulnerable as some would observe, but it is a peculiarly embarrassing weakness for a regime which seeks not only complete independence from "capitalist" supplies but also the allegiance of peasant populations in backward countries. Soviet biologists can, of course, cite extending circumstances after a civil war and two world wars, they might also claim it to be an achievement that the number of livestock is now not much lower than in 1913, and they can point on the credit side the increased proportion of wheat in total grain output and great increases in other animal

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that collective farming has fulfilled its essential task: it has made it possible to extract from the countryside enough supplies for the industrialisation of the towns.

It can safely be assumed that nothing is further from the mind of the Soviet leaders than to admit the bankruptcy of planned collective farming, for that is an inherent part of the Soviet system, and to jettison it would amount to admitting the bankruptcy of the system as a whole. The *kolkhozes* cannot be so easily uprooted from the Russian landscape. The present measures represent not the dismantling of a broken-down machine, but an attempt to lubricate and keep in motion a machine that is groaning with the strain of its effort. Moscow no longer tries to deny that the machine is inefficient. Soviet leaders have lately been crying on the rooftops that agricultural supplies are failing to match up either to growing demand or to the planners' expectations, failing even to correspond to what has been invested in the agricultural sector. Article after article in *Pravda* denounces the "intolerable situation" in state farms, in fodder output and in stockbreeding, revealing countless errors and failures in both production and distribution.

The planners' problem is not merely to feed a rising population but specifically to ensure food for the mushrooming towns. Russia's rural population has remained roughly unchanged since 1913 at about 120 million people. But during the quarter century of the planned era, the urban population has risen by 50 million, and in the last five years alone by 17 million, of whom nine million represent the influx from the countryside. And a man who has come to town is not only, in Khrushchev's words, "a food producer turned food consumer"; he is also apt to demand a richer and more varied diet. The promises made by Stalin's heirs in 1953 have whetted his appetite, and the relatively bigger price cuts of recent years have also added to the inflationary strain.

The countryside has also been a headache for Soviet leaders in more than a strictly economic sense. Its life as well as its production cannot be controlled, planned and ruled as can be done in the towns. It was no accident that Stalin, in his last pamphlet, dwelt on the need to eliminate the difference between "collective" property in the country and state ownership in the towns. The avowed aim is to bridge the gap, to uproot the remnants of private property and transform the peasants—now collective farmers—into agricultural workers. A step was taken in this direction, under Khrushchev's own guidance, in 1950 when some 250,000 collective farms were amalgamated into 93,000 larger units. In face of peasant resistance, however, the regime did not dare to proceed any further along the road towards "agro-towns."

Thus Stalin's successors were left with a rural task. They had to step up food supplies for the towns rapidly.

they were also determined in the long run to transform the countryside and tighten their control over it. Popular pressure, encouraged by the pledges made to the consumer by the new regime, rendered the first task so urgent that the second had to be pushed temporarily into the background. In the second half of 1953 Russia's new leaders admitted openly that the state of Soviet livestock was poor, and that dairy produce, meat, and even vegetables and potatoes were in short supply. Stalin's method of coping with such a situation and extracting surpluses from the countryside was to burden it with taxes and offer low prices. In their urgent need, his heirs applied the opposite remedy: they granted tax reliefs, reduced compulsory deliveries and paid higher prices. Soon afterwards, Khrushchev exploded another myth, that of Soviet self-sufficiency in grain. He insisted that the crop of coarse grains in particular would have to be greatly increased if his ambitious plans for livestock breeding were to be fulfilled, and "volunteers" were sent to "conquer land" in cold and distant Kazakhstan and Siberia, with strict orders to get some 30 million tons of grain within a few years.

At the beginning of this year, on the eve of Malenkov's sensational fall, these new policies had had little time to mature and the results were still very meagre. A slight improvement was claimed for livestock, while additional grain from the reclaimed land was barely sufficient to compensate for bad weather in other regions. As yet no great achievements can be claimed for the policy of incentives. Imports had to be continued and stocks run down still further; yet even this did not prove enough to counteract the inflationary pressure resulting from price cuts. The result was the classical one: shortages of meat and other foods, queues, and mounting discontent. Khrushchev's own intervention must be seen against this background. His new formula, borrowed from American experience, apparently without much consideration for climatic and other differences, is a gigantic, and highly dubious, expansion of maize cultivation for fodder. Both the policy of incentives and the drive eastward are to be continued as well.

Simultaneously Khrushchev announced a new concession which is elaborated in the decree published last week. Local authorities and individual collective farms are promised a little more elbow room. The central authorities will continue to determine regional contributions and each farm will still be faced with its minimum quota, but both farm and district will have a greater say in planning and will tend to benefit more if they overfulfil their tasks. It would be naive, however, to hail this measure as a major abandonment of centralised planning. It is significant that Khrushchev announced at the same time that control over deliveries will be exercised by the machine and tractor stations.