



AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search
<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>
aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

Rousing the Somnolent Beast

Soviet Agriculture: Comparative Perspectives. Edited by Kenneth R. Gray. Ames: Iowa State University Press (A special study of the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington DC), 1990, 291 pages, \$34.95

Reviewed by Elizabeth Clayton

By all accounts, Soviet agriculture suffers from all the bureaucratic ills: a petty management, a lazy (or alienated) labor force, wasted investment, and irrational prices. Any simple bystander/farmer with a modicum of power and know-how could improve things. Reforming this behemoth, which has proved difficult, is the subject of Gray's book. It should interest not only Soviet and socialist specialists in agriculture but anyone who has tackled a monolithic organization.

At the beginning and more visionary stage of a reform, which is Gray's focus, the reformers can suffer from a myopia that prevents a safe passage through untamed dreams and what is possible. Gray and his authors harness the would-be reformers by comparing the Soviet Union's agriculture to that of other socialist countries, to practice in the United States, and to statistical projections. The method has its flaws—noncomparable data, crude bases, infelicities of definition—but it is more serviceable than most methods and more easily understood. The data end in 1986, but the conclusions will still interest the 1990's reader.

Implicit in the comparative method is the attractiveness of foreign technology and practice and the possibility of borrowing it. The sources studied in this book are interesting. Jacobs finds that Soviet practice usually *precedes* the leading agricultural economies journal's report on a foreign practice. Personal contact would seem to be the key to its acceptance. Wyman highlights Soviet borrowing from Bulgaria, especially by the large agro-industrial complexes. (He also points out that Bulgaria and the Soviet Union gave the same name to the organizations but created different concepts.) Nove highlights what the Soviets might learn about agricultural organization from the Hungarians.

Sources of borrowing are many, and the ultimate obstacle to agricultural development has a domestic origin. Often the knowledge is there. Craumer offers a precise, careful, and exceptional chronicle of dryland farming practices in the Soviet Virgin Lands (in the Russian and Kazakh republics), demonstrating Soviet ability to learn from experience, the need for regional

adaptation, and the drive to learn and apply knowledge. The obstacle is implementation. Litvin addresses these obstacles by documenting the creation of agricultural information in scientific institutes but cites the nearly insurmountable barriers to transferring knowledge to production. Waedekin explores equipment shortages in small-scale (private) agriculture that keep it from attaining optimal output. Most of the failure is attributed to input suppliers, whose share of the agro-industrial sector's resources, according to Dovring's work, is unusually large and often wasted.

The one inflexibility of Soviet agriculture that overwhelms all others is irrational (disequilibrium) pricing. Prices are set, for example, to regulate peasant income, to extract land rent, and to support local government. Karen Brooks writes that establishing marginal cost pricing and allowing farmers to respond would increase output but would considerably change

The papers include Section I—The Organization and Performance of Soviet Agriculture: (1) "Introduction" by Kenneth R. Gray, (2) "A Comparative Analysis of Agricultural Productivity Trends in Centrally Planned Economies" by Lung-Fai Wong and Vernon Ruttan, (3) "Costs of Agricultural Growth and Development: A Cross-National Analysis Focusing on the USSR" by Folke Dovring, (4) "Soviet Food Imbalances and Their Prospective Amelioration" by Ihor Stebelsky, (5) "Soviet Utilization of Food: Focus on Meat and Dairy Processing" by Kenneth R. Gray, (6) "Soviet Agricultural Policy and Pricing under Gorbachev" by Karen M. Brooks, (7) "Toward a Soviet Responsibility System? Recent Developments in the Agricultural Collective Contract" by Don Van Atta, (8) "Recent Changes in Soviet Rural Housing Policy" by Carol Nechemias, (9) "Trends in Soviet Dryland Farming and Soil Conservation Practices with Comparison to North American Developments" by Peter R. Craumer.

Section II—Borrowing from Foreign Agricultural Systems: (10) "Scientific and Technical Information Concerning Agriculture in the USSR" by Valentin Litvin, (11) "A Content Analysis of Writings on Foreign Agricultural Experience" by Everett M. Jacobs, (12) "The Bulgarian Experience with Centrally Planned Agriculture: Lessons for Soviet Reformers?" by Michael L. Wyman, (13) "Private Agriculture in Socialist Countries: Implications for the USSR" by Karl-Eugen Waedekin, (14) "Can the USSR Learn from Hungarian and Chinese Agricultural Experiences?" by Alec Nove.

Clayton is associate vice chancellor for research, University of Missouri-St. Louis.

the relative profitability of different crops, the traditional cropping patterns in some areas, and the distribution of income. Since other agricultural systems, such as the European Community and the United States, can thrive on disequilibrium prices, there are other factors at work. Gray rightly notes the Soviet predilection for public jealousy of "rich" farmers and the sensitivity (even outrage) toward speculation and monopolistic profits in processing and distributing. The managerial climate is not benign.

Reforms in the Soviet agricultural labor force show inconsistent results. On one hand, Van Atta, comparing the labor contracts between large farms and small work units in China and the Soviet Union, finds that Soviet productivity gains are inhibited because the Soviet small units obtain very little appropriate small-scale equipment, face public envy unheard of in China, and do not provide social welfare amenities. On the other hand, Wong's work indicates that labor productivity has risen and that technology, which has experienced a "negative growth," is the barrier to overall gains. (Wong's concept of negative technological

change is engaging. It cannot be conclusive because he estimates a production function with physical data, not costs, and technology is a residual.)

Soviet labor incentives do have a social dimension. While farm incomes have risen along with agricultural subsidies, the increases have no value without an improved quality of life. Nechemias, investigating Soviet rural housing, finds that highly politicized programs have debased the value of investment. Furthermore, not all Soviet regions are identical. Stebelsky compares regional food supplies to consumption norms, which are rather like minimum daily requirements, and to international experience, and finds that Estonia comes close to an optimum, while Kirghizia experiences significant shortfalls. Waedekin's careful study of provisioning from the private plots finds that republics differ considerably in their attitudes toward private production and free markets.

This collection is highly informative and readable, has useful bibliographies and an index, and shows agricultural economics study at its careful best.

Journal of Agricultural Economics

VOL 41, No 3

September 1990

- Aspects of Farm Profitability: An Outmoded Concept?, *J. S. Nix*
 Agricultural Policies in OECD Countries: Agenda for the Future, *G. Viatte*
 Contract Farming and Outgrower Schemes in East and Southern Africa, *D. Glover*
 In Search of the CAP's 'Agricultural Community', *B. Hill*
 Agricultural Price Policy, Food Aid and Input Subsidy Reforms in Burkina Faso, *M. J. Roth and P. C. Abbott*
 The Influence of the Agri-Monetary System on Agricultural Trade in the EC: The Case of Sugar, *S. von Cramon-Taubadel*
 Testing Oligopolistic and Oligopsonistic Behaviour: An Application to the US Meat-Packing Industry, *A. M. Azzam and E. Pagoulatos*
 Communications in Agriculture: Results of a Farmer Survey, *A. P. Fearn*
 Government Expenditure on Agriculture and Agricultural Performance in Developing Countries: An Empirical Evaluation, *D. Diakosavvas*
 Responses to Risk in Weed Control Decisions Under Expected Profit Maximisation, *D. Pannell*
 Econometric Modelling of the European Community Compound Feed Sector: An Application to France, *Y. Surry*
 Major Consumer Trends Affecting the US Food System, *B. Senauer*
 Value-Adding Activity and Employment in the Beef and Sheep Sector in Northern Ireland, *J. Davis, N. Fulton and S. McErlean*
 Agricultural Research Expenditures and Agricultural Productivity Change, *D. Hailam*
 Farmland as an Asset: Comment, *G. H. Peters*
 Farmland as an Asset: Reply, *C. Johnson*
 Reviews and Publications Received
 The Agricultural Economics Society
 Conference Programme, Wye, April, 1990
 Annual General Meeting: Minutes of the 59th
 Prize Essay Competition

EDITOR: Professor K. J. THOMSON

The *Journal of Agricultural Economics* is published by the Agricultural Economics Society, School of Agriculture, University of Aberdeen, 581 King Street, Aberdeen AB9 1UD, three times a year in January, May and September, price £8.50 per issue. Requests for subscriptions or membership applications should be addressed to the Treasurer, (G. P. Hill), Wye College, Ashford, Kent TN25 5AH.