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## 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. Wyzan 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. Wyzan, (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.

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