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RESEARCH NOTES
AND STATISTICS

A Note on Agriculture in Russia Today

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At the entrance to the village are empty log-houses without windows. Where once there was a school building, a post-office, or a hospital, there are now heaps of rubble and electricity poles with no wire. These are scenes reminiscent of films dedicated to the history of the Second World War – and they are what a correspondent of *Pravda* saw in November 2011, in the once prosperous village of Leonidovka in Penza province of the Russian Federation. Similar scenes can now be witnessed in the 19,000 Russian villages that have practically ceased to exist over the last 20 years.

THE SOVIET PAST

In the last decades of Soviet history, Penza province was one of the leading agricultural regions of the USSR. Addressing the delegates of the 25th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) on March 2, 1976, the First Secretary of the Penza Provincial Committee of the CPSU, L. B. Ermin, said: “Despite the unfavourable climatic conditions of the last years the agriculture of the province continued to develop fast. The average annual increase of the gross agricultural product in kolkhozes and sovkhozes of the province was 10 per cent.”¹

Although a short growing period, severe winters, and sporadic spells of drought have always made agricultural production in Russia a difficult and risky proposition, a rapid rate of development was typical of most of Russia’s agriculture in the Soviet period, as opposed to the pre-revolution era. The vicissitudes of weather conditions often proved fatal for pre-revolutionary Russian peasants, the vast majority of whom used traditional methods of ploughing and harvesting with a minimum of modern agricultural technologies. Poor crops led to starvation and famine, resulting in a grim toll of human lives in that era of Russia’s history.

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¹ CPSU (1976), p. 76. Kolkhoz = collective farm; sovkhoz = state farm.

Reconstruction of agriculture in the Soviet period started with the collectivisation of peasants' farms in 1929-32, accompanied by a rapid increase of machinery and the introduction of scientific agricultural methods. In 1928, before collectivisation, Soviet agriculture had 27,000 tractors, 700 trucks, and just 2 grain combine harvesters. By 1940, the number of tractors had risen to 531,000 and grain combine harvesters to 182,000, and there were 228,000 motor cars in the countryside.²

The reconstruction of agriculture also resulted in an increase in output: agricultural output in 1940 exceeded agricultural output in 1913 by 76 per cent.³ In 1913, the agricultural output produced by 130,700,000 peasants in rural Russia met their own demand as well as that of the 18,400,000-strong urban population. In 1940, the majority of the population of the USSR was still constituted by rural inhabitants, 131,000,000 in number, but the urban population rose to 63,100,000,⁴ and the share of agricultural workers in the labour force shrank from 75 per cent to 54 per cent.⁵ Yet the output of these workers was used to supply both themselves and almost the same number of people not engaged in agricultural labour.

Despite the devastation caused to the Russian countryside by the Nazi invasion, Soviet agriculture quickly recovered and continued to develop. In 1989, 77.6 per cent of gross agricultural output in the Russian Federation was produced by 12,900 collective farms (kolkhozes) and 12,500 state farms (sovkhозes).⁶

These agricultural enterprises had at their disposal vast lands on which it was easy to use machinery, and there was a constant increase, over the years, in the agricultural machines employed on the farms. By 1989, as compared to 1940, there was a six-fold increase in the number of tractors. The number of grain-harvester combines increased four-and-a-half times in the Russian Federation. In addition, there were over 1,450,000 tractors, about 590,000 grain harvester combines, and over 500,000 trucks.⁷ By 1990, Soviet industry was producing more than 4,000 types of agricultural machinery.⁸

The quantity of chemical fertilizers used in Soviet agriculture increased more than 20 times from 1940 to 1989.⁹ In 1989, the Russian Federation used over 11 million tons of chemical fertilizers in agriculture. As a result of these and many other efforts to enhance agricultural productivity, the gross output of Soviet agriculture increased approximately two-and-a-half times from 1940 to 1989.¹⁰

² Central Statistical Administration of the USSR (1973), p. 302.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 501.

⁶ Central Statistical Administration of the USSR (1990), p. 283.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 301

⁸ Central Statistical Administration of the USSR (1991), p. 428.

⁹ Central Statistical Administration of the USSR (1990), p. 308.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

Though most Soviet agricultural enterprises were profitable, the state annually brought financial aid to unprofitable enterprises, helping them to buy machinery and other equipment, and chemical fertilizers, and to build roads and houses.

Of the total agricultural output, 22.4 per cent was produced in small, private plots by members of the kolkhozes and sovkhozes.¹¹ Their main products were potatoes and other vegetables, fruit, milk, eggs and other such products that did not involve the use of machinery. The produce of these private plots was sold at the markets.

The development of Soviet agriculture allowed an increased supply of raw material to industry and of food to the growing urban population (which increased from 63,100,000 in 1940 to 190,000,000 in 1989).¹² In this period, many village people had become city dwellers, or had changed their occupation from agricultural jobs while continuing to stay in the country. The rural population decreased from 131,000,000 in 1940 to 93,000,000 in 1989, and the share of agricultural workers in the labour force decreased from 54 per cent to 20 per cent in the USSR as a whole, and, in the Russian Federation, to 15 per cent.¹³

At the same time, the growing productivity of Soviet agriculture resulted in better food consumption for the average person. While per capita consumption of bread and potatoes decreased after 1927, the consumption of other products increased - although insufficiently in the case of some products (meat, fruit, and vegetables other than potatoes, in Table 1 below).

Table 1 *Consumption of different products by an average Soviet person, 1927 and 1989 in kilograms*

	1927	1989
Bread and other farinaceous products	247	137
Potatoes	162	118
Milk and other dairy products	96	295
Eggs (pieces)	74	249
Fish	12.8	18.4
Meat	53	57
Sugar	14.2	18.4
Vegetables (other than potatoes)	57	101
Fruits	25	42

Source: RCP(B) (1964), p. 459.

¹¹ Kara-Murza (2002), p. 27.

¹² Central Statistical Administration of the USSR (1990), p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 503.

Soviet agriculture did face several challenges: it needed more and better machinery, more and better roads in the countryside, more fertilizers, more and better housing. Yet the rate of agricultural growth seemed to be a good guarantee that these problems would be solved sooner rather than later.

AFTER CAPITALIST RESTORATION

The situation in Russia's agriculture changed radically after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist order. The whole economy took a downward plunge after 1990 (Table 2). A renowned Russian economist, Abel Aganbegyan, described the decline as follows: "For ten years we were falling into an abyss."

The advocates of capitalist restoration expected that the collapse of socialism would cause the immediate dismantling of the Soviet agricultural collectives. They also insisted that the establishment of millions of individual farms would result in increased productivity for Russia's agriculture.

The changes that have happened in agriculture, however, are different from what was expected by those who came to power in 1991. Today, 20 years after the capitalist restoration began, there are 240,000 farms in Russia with about 900,000 people working on them.¹⁴ The vast majority of the farmers produce mostly for their own consumption. The produce of only 20,000 agricultural farms contributes substantially to the agricultural market.¹⁵ All individual farmers together produce only 7 per cent of the gross national agricultural output.¹⁶

Most of the workers of the kolkhozes and sovkhozes did not leave their agricultural enterprises. While most of the agricultural enterprises changed the system of sharing ownership and profits, 34 per cent of kolkhozes and sovkhozes continue to function on the same principles as in the Soviet times. As some of these former collective and state farms have been divided into smaller units, there are now around 27,000

Table 2 *Social and economic crisis in Russia in the 1990s (1989=100)*

	Lowest point of the crisis
Gross national product	56
Industry	46
Agriculture	54
Unemployment (per cent of the active population)	13
Reduction of population (thousand persons per year)	950

Source: Aganbegyan (2009), p. 16.

¹⁴ Statistics of Russia (2007), p. 87.

¹⁵ Kalabekov (2010), p. 49.

¹⁶ Federal Service of Statistics (2010a), p. 15.

agricultural enterprises in Russia, as compared to 25,400 kolkhozes and sovkhozes in 1990.¹⁷

There has been a shift from the predominance of large collectives with the number of smaller, private plots of workers of agricultural enterprises increasing approximately two-fold. While remaining members of the enterprises, workers devote more time and energy to their private plots. As a result, private plots now account for 48.8 per cent of the gross agricultural output (in 1989 this share was 22.4 per cent). Enterprises of various kinds produce 43.7 per cent of the agricultural output (as against 77.6 per cent in 1989); the rest is produced by individual farmers.¹⁸

At the same time, aid from the State to agricultural enterprises has reduced substantially. In the 1990s, only 3 to 3.5 per cent of Russia's budget expenditure was allocated to agriculture.¹⁹ In the absence of State aid, smaller land users as well as the agricultural enterprises cannot afford to buy machinery, other equipment, and chemical fertilizers, or to build roads and houses.

As a result, the number of agricultural machines used in agriculture has registered a decrease every year. The number of tractors utilised by Russia's agricultural sector in 1999 was one-fourteenth of the number utilised in 1990. In 1999, the number of tractors that were disposed of because of obsolescence was 12 times greater than the number of new tractors acquired in agriculture. Most new tractors came from abroad. In 2004, the production of tractors in Russia came down to a mere 3.4 per cent of the 1990 level.²⁰

The reduction in the number of tractors, grain harvester combines and other agricultural machinery went hand in hand with a reduction of land under cultivation. In 1989, about 120 million hectares of land were under cultivation in the Russian Federation. Of this, 40 million hectares are no longer used for agricultural purposes.²¹

In 1999 there was a change for the better in the general economic situation of Russia, when, with a rise in the world prices for crude oil and gas, the country increased exports of these products. As Russia turned into a gas station and gas furnace for the West, it began to receive profits and economic growth began. The same economist Aganbegyan now said: "It took us ten years to climb out of the abyss." A part of the new profits was used to help agriculture.

In September 2005, Russia's President V. V. Putin announced a national project called "Development of Agriculture-Industrial Complex." In 2008, the next President of

¹⁷ Kashin (2011), p. 67.

¹⁸ Kara-Murza (2011), p. 125.

¹⁹ Kashin (2011), p. 53.

²⁰ Kara-Murza (2002), p. 106.

²¹ Kashin (2011), p. 53.

Table 3 *Some economic indices of Russia in 2007 (1989=100)*

Gross national product	100
Industry	85
Agriculture	80
Unemployment (per cent of the active population)	6.5
Reduction of population (thousand persons per year)	500

Source: Federal Service of Statistics (2008), p. 38.

Russia, D. A. Medvedev, turned the project into “The State Programme of Agricultural Development.” Since then the amount of money allocated by the State towards agriculture increased. Yet the share of agriculture in Russia’s increased budget expenditure fell to 1.5 per cent.²²

Despite a lot of rhetoric about the need to improve the situation radically, at present over half of the agricultural enterprises are in debt and practically bankrupt. They are unable to buy new machinery or technical equipment (see Table 4). The obsolescence levels of old agricultural machinery stand at 60 to 70 per cent.²³

Paradoxically, however, even as Russia now produces less grain than in the Soviet period (reduced from 119 million tons in 1989 to 67 million tons in 2010 and 97.8 million tons in 2011), it exported 25 million tons of grain in 2011.²⁴ The reason for this is that a large share of the grain produced in the USSR was used to feed cattle, and during periods of drought, the country had to import grain in order to provide food for cattle. But over the last 20 years there has been a dramatic decrease in the cattle population (Table 5).

Table 4 *Number of tractors in Russia’s agriculture in thousands*

1989	2006	2009
1450	1068	874

Source: Kara-Murza (2002), p. 114.

Table 5 *Cattle in Russia in millions*

	1990	2011
Cows	20.6	9.2
Pigs	33.2	18.6
Sheep and goats	67	25.1

Source: Kara-Murza (2011), p. 88.

²² Federal Service of Statistics (2011a), p. 129.

²³ Kara-Murza (2002), p. 95.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

As a result, the production of meat and milk in Russia too has decreased since 1990 (Table 6).

But if one looks at the figures indicating the annual consumption of an average Russian (Table 7), one sees that the undernourishment of the 1990s no longer holds, and that it is now close to the Soviet level and has even overtaken that level for a number of products (meat, sugar, eggs and fruits).

However, one should take into account the fact that the diets of modern Russians differ substantially depending upon their social status. The difference in incomes between the best paid one-fifth section of the Soviet population and the worst paid one-fifth section used to be approximately 1:4. At present this difference is close to 1:20.²⁵ Sociological surveys indicate that every tenth Russian lacks enough money to buy food. At the same time, the food needs of those who can afford it are satisfied to a great extent by imported goods (Table 8).²⁶

Contemporary Russia harvests its profits from its oil and gas fields. This is hardly a rational way of using the country's wealth. At least half of Russia's gains from imports are spent on buying food from abroad. Imports of food products cost 30 times more than the government spends on Russia's agriculture.

Table 6 *Production of meat and milk in Russia* in million tons

	1989	2008
Meat	8.9	2.9
Milk	52.6	32.4

Source: Kara-Murza (2011), p. 90.

Table 7 *Consumption of different products by an average Russian person, 1989, 1997, and 2010* in kilograms

	1989	1997	2010
Bread and other products made from grain	137	118	119
Potatoes	118	130	104
Milk and other milk products	295	229	247
Eggs (pieces)	249	210	269
Fish	18.4	9.3	15.5
Meat	57	36	69
Sugar	18.4	33	39
Vegetables (other than potatoes)	101	110	101
Fruits	42	46	58

Source: Federal Service of Statistics (2011b), p. 13.

²⁵ Federal Service of Statistics (2010b), p. 55.

²⁶ Kashin (2011), p. 81.

Table 8 Supply of food products in Russia, 2010

Item	Percentage share	
	Produced in Russia	Imported
Meat	72	28
Milk	81	19
Butter	66	34
Potatoes	76	24
Vegetables (excl. potatoes)	81	19

Source: Federal Service of Statistics, 2011b, p. 84.

By now the share of agriculture in Russia's gross national product has come down to just 4.7 per cent.²⁷ It is no wonder, then, that over the last 20 years, the share of agricultural workers in the labour force of Russia has decreased from 15 to 10 per cent.²⁸ This has resulted in peasants' houses and other rural buildings, even whole villages, being wiped off the face of the earth.

THE COMMUNIST ALTERNATIVE

The near-collapse of Russian agriculture comes as a shock to millions of Russians. By now many of them have come to realize that the promise of Russia becoming prosperous by a turn to individual farming and other such capitalist propaganda is a fraud.

Yet, because the share of the population working in agriculture constitutes just 10 per cent, the agrarian problem was not at the centre of political debates during the parliamentary election held in Russia in December 2011. Before the election, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) announced its programme for restoration of national agriculture, which includes the following demands.²⁹

Nationalization of land, and an end to the selling and buying of land, as was the case in the Soviet era. An increase in the share of budgetary expenditure for agriculture from 1.5 per cent to 10-15 per cent. At the same time, peasants should receive financial aid to buy machinery and fertilizers. The programme calls for further modernization of agriculture. It urges the building of schools, kindergartens, hospitals, clinics, and cultural centres. It states that specialists in agriculture should receive housing free of charge as was the case in the Soviet Union.

The election results showed that the agricultural programme of the Communist Party was supported in the countryside. Though political apathy is typical of many

²⁷ Federal Service of Statistics (2008), p. 91.

²⁸ Kara-Murza (2002), p. 21.

²⁹ CPRF (2011), p. 21.

Russians today and 40 per cent of the population did not vote in the December elections, the peasants of Russia contributed heavily to the partial successes of the CPRF in the election. They welcomed its programme directed at the restoration of Russian agriculture.

Keywords: Soviet and post-Soviet agriculture in Russia, food consumption in Russia, food imports by Russia.

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