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Agrarian Policy of the USSR in 1953–1985: From Khrushchev’s Reforms to the Food Programme

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Abstract: The article studies the evolution of Soviet agrarian policy from the death of Stalin to the mid-1980s. After 1953 the leadership repeatedly tried to reform agriculture: it raised procurement prices, enlarged collective farms, developed the Virgin Lands, promoted maize, set up the councils of national economy, carried out the 1965 reform, adopted the land reclamation programme and, in 1982, the Food Programme. The author analyses the reasons for the limited results of these measures: the extensive model of growth, excessive centralisation of planning, political interference in science and the lack of real material incentives for producers. Particular attention is paid to the grain crisis of 1963, problems of land reclamation and the formation of the agro-industrial complex. It is concluded that the reforms did not change the essence of the administrative-command system, and accumulated contradictions led to a crisis of the agrarian sector by the end of the USSR.

Keywords: agrarian policy, USSR, collective farms, state farms, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Virgin Lands, land reclamation, sovnarkhozes, Food Programme, agro-industrial complex.

Agriculture remained the most vulnerable link of the Soviet economy throughout the existence of the USSR. Although the agrarian sphere received heightened attention in 1953–1985, the food problem was never solved. The study of agrarian policy in this period remains relevant because it helps to understand the origins of the structural imbalances inherited by the post-Soviet states.

The aim of the article is to trace the main stages of the USSR’s agrarian policy from the September (1953) Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee to the Food Programme of 1982 and to identify the reasons for the limited effectiveness of the reforms. The objectives are: 1) to describe the state of agriculture in the post-war years; 2) to analyse the measures of the Khrushchev period; 3) to examine the reforms of the second half of the 1960s–1970s; 4) to show the content and results of the Food Programme.

Two assessments of the agrarian transformations are consistently present in the domestic literature. One stresses their reformist character and real achievements: for example, the 1965 reform is described as one of the most radical of the entire Soviet period, and the five-year plan that followed the September (1965) Plenum is called “golden” [1; 2; 3]. The other emphasises inconsistency, “campaign-style management” and the absence of a unified plan [4; 5]. According to researchers, the country’s leaders did not understand why the collective-farm and state-farm system failed to deliver the expected results, and looked for the causes everywhere except in the system itself [6].

We rely on the concept of extensive and intensive types of economic growth. The Soviet economy was characterised by the extensive path: abundant natural resources and the size of the population did not encourage the search for new ways of raising efficiency, while the country’s

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income was largely generated by exporting unprocessed raw materials, in particular oil, under favourable world market conditions.

The historical-genetic, problem-chronological and comparative methods were applied, along with the analysis of statistical data and normative documents. The study draws on monographs and articles by Russian researchers, dissertations, party documents and the periodical press.

During the war, agriculture supplied the army and industry, but at the cost of losing about a third of the able-bodied rural population. The territories that fell under occupation had produced 38% of grain and 84% of sugar beet and held 38% of cattle [7]. After the war the main resources went to heavy industry, assistance to the countryside remained minimal, and the number of horses on collective farms had fallen by more than half during the war. The drought of 1946 led to famine and a mass outflow of rural residents to the cities. In 1946 the gross grain harvest was 2.2 times lower than in 1940, and in 1945 agricultural output amounted to about 60% of the pre-war level [8].

The collective-farm village lived with low pay for labour and high taxes on personal subsidiary plots, which pushed people to leave the countryside. The grain harvest of 1953 remained at the 1950 level and was below the pre-war one; procurements did not cover the need for food and seed, and the country found itself on the verge of a new food crisis [9].

After Stalin's death the need to turn the economy towards the needs of the population increased sharply. At the September (1953) Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee, N. S. Khrushchev spoke of the need to overcome bureaucratic methods of managing collective farms and to expand their economic rights and the material interest of their workers. Procurement and purchase prices were raised significantly, and the compulsory delivery quotas for personal subsidiary plots were lowered. However, the position of collective-farm chairmen remained ambiguous: regulation from above persisted, and the freedom to make decisions was limited [4].

The expansion of the grain acreage took the central place. The Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee in February–March 1954 recognised the cultivation of virgin and fallow lands in Kazakhstan, Western Siberia, the Volga region and the Urals as the main direction of agricultural development. The campaign was treated as a "revolutionary" measure. But as it developed, collective farms increasingly "suffocated" under directives, the effectiveness of administrative measures declined, and production took on a coercive character. The policy of enlarging farms, begun by the 1950 resolution and reducing the number of collective farms from 225,000 to 94,000 by 1952, likewise failed to bring the expected results [10].

Researchers assess many of Khrushchev's innovations as ill-considered. These include the "maize epic", the construction of multi-storey residential buildings in rural areas, and repeated reorganisations of management; by their estimates, no overall plan of transformation existed [5]. By the 1960s maize was being sown in Kazakhstan and Central Asia, the Caucasus, Belarus and the Baltic region, while early and late varieties of wheat were sown in the main grain-producing areas. This did not solve the food problem: from 1955 to 1964 the grain procurement plan was fulfilled only three times — in 1956, 1958 and 1964. Shortages were felt in different regions: certain kinds of cereals and butter disappeared from the shops, and interruptions in the supply of flour and white bread caused queues. In 1961 the plan was fulfilled only through grain purchases abroad [11].

In 1957 management was restructured on a territorial principle: councils of national economy (sovnarkhozes) were created in economic regions, which were supposed to decentralise the economy and reduce bureaucracy. By 1961–1963 the number of regions had grown to 17–18 [12]. The March

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(1962) and subsequent decisions transferred the management of farms to territorial production administrations, and the growth of national income in 1961–1965 was only 5.7% — less than in the preceding five-year period [13]. Decisions were made hastily: for instance, the November (1962) Plenum of the Central Committee merged 123 territorial production administrations into 77, without taking into account production potential, labour resources or geography.

The crisis culminated in 1963. The Central Committee resolution of 20 August 1963 set a course for economising bread, and grain exports to capitalist countries were effectively halted from September; at the same time a programme of purchases abroad was drawn up, and as early as December 1963 the Soviet government was forced to buy a large consignment of grain from the USA [14]. In the 1970s dependence on grain imports increased.

Political interference in science also affected agrarian research. While the number of professors and university teachers grew in the 1930s, the number of scientific workers fell by a factor of 1.5 [15]. N. I. Vavilov organised more than 180 expeditions across the USSR and more than 50 abroad, beginning his scientific journeys with Central Asia, and assembled a plant collection that numbered about 250,000 samples in his lifetime [16]. His ideas of international scientific cooperation and of the fundamental study of genetics and plant breeding did not match ideological attitudes, and the slogan of the fastest possible advance of agriculture did not match his formula “state union, science and land” [17]. Vavilov was arrested in August 1940 and died on 26 January 1943 [18]. His fate shows how the political situation suppressed the scientific foundation of agrarian policy.

After Khrushchev’s removal in October 1964, the November (1964) and March (1965) Plenums of the CPSU Central Committee adopted a resolution on urgent measures for the development of agriculture. Collective and state farms had their debts to the state written off, farms received the right to bank credit, and state farms received the right to use profit to expand production and for capital construction. A firm and unchanging grain procurement plan was set, procurement prices were raised, and a 50% bonus on the base price was introduced to encourage above-plan sales. The sovnarkhozes were abolished (by 1966), but 18 economic regions remained as the territorial basis for the location of agricultural production [19]. From 1965 to 1974 the monthly pay of the rural population grew 1.8 times, and in the 1970s agro-industrial policy received further development.

The most important innovation of the 1965 economic reform was economic accountability (khozraschyot): the relations of enterprises with the centre were to be built on the indicator of “profit”. But the Soviet domestic market obeyed rules different from those in Western countries, and “profit” was determined not by the market but by norms and coefficients set from above. Under monopoly conditions, indicators could be inflated by gradual price increases, so the combination of monopolised production with formal elements of the market stimulated inflation [1; 2]. At the same time, the five-year plan of 1966–1970 went down in history as a period of record results for the USSR [3].

The land reclamation programme was of particular importance. The May (1966) Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee began a new stage of irrigation construction. The Central Committee resolution of 16 June 1966 declared land development the most important state task, and the supply of 62 types of machinery was envisaged for the construction sites. In practice, the output of reclamation machines was extremely slow: in 1966–1967, 11 machines were mastered instead of 21 [20]. Nevertheless, the irrigated area grew from 9.9 to 13.7 million hectares and by 1974 provided more than 21% of the gross output of the agrarian complex [21]. At the same time, some decisions were

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chaotic: for example, work on developing marshy lands in the RSFSR led to the disappearance of a number of species of birds and insects.

By the early 1970s the consequences of the continuing extensive course were increasingly evident. Sowing planning "by hectares" was made mandatory for republics, provinces, districts and farms, and the growth of the urban population alongside a reduction in the number of people employed in the agrarian sector held back the development of the whole agro-industrial complex. Food shortages grew: as early as January 1979, the newspaper Pravda received 16 letters complaining of interruptions in the bread supply [22]. The harvests of 1981–1982 were extremely poor: instead of the 215–243 million tonnes of grain envisaged by the plan, only 155–175 million tonnes were collected.

At the Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee on 24 May 1982, L. I. Brezhnev instructed the USSR Council of Ministers to prepare a Food Programme for the period up to 1990 [23]. Its basis was the agro-industrial complex (AIC) — a system of branches participating in all stages of the production, storage, processing and delivery of products to the consumer. It comprised three spheres: enterprises producing machinery, equipment, fertilisers and plant-protection products; agriculture proper, forestry and fisheries; and enterprises for the processing, storage, transport and sale of finished products [24].

The Programme provided for the comprehensive mechanisation of crop and livestock farming, the production of spare parts, universal tractors of 150 horsepower, machines for soil-conservation technologies, and production lines for processing and storing output [25]. In management, agro-industrial associations and committees were created, and in Moscow the State Agro-Industrial Committee of the USSR, which united a number of agricultural departments. In practice, however, a considerable part of the measures boiled down to the expansion of bureaucratic structures and the renaming of existing institutions. Capital investment did not give the expected return, and industrial poultry farms turned out to depend on feed brought in from other regions.

The USSR's agrarian policy in 1953–1985 comprised heterogeneous measures — from price increases and debt write-offs to the Virgin Lands, sovnarkhozes, land reclamation and the Food Programme — but developed within a single administrative-command model. The reforms were unable to remove its main contradictions: directive planning, the absence of real incentives for producers, and the extensive character of growth. By the early 1980s the growth of capital investment was not accompanied by higher efficiency, and the shortage of food and goods led to the spread of ration-coupon forms of distribution.

The experience of this period shows that without a change in the system of property relations, incentives and management, agrarian transformations can only temporarily soften the problem. For the post-Soviet states, taking this legacy into account remains important when assessing modern agrarian reforms.

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