

IL'IA E. ZELENIN

N.S. Khrushchev's Agrarian Policy and Agriculture in the USSR

Devotion to Marxist ideology, a belief that a communist society lay just around the corner, ill-advised decisions on crops and collective-farm administration, and a demographic shift from the countryside to the city had a negative impact on Soviet agricultural production in the 1950s and the 1960s, despite sincere efforts by the government to reform agriculture. As a result, the USSR had to import grain beginning in the early 1960s.

The term “Khrushchev’s agrarian policy” is, of course, imprecise and somewhat arbitrary; it errs through personification. Khrushchev alone did not set agrarian policy: all the party structures took part to some degree, regularly convened party congresses discussed it, and the Central Committee held no less than fourteen “agricultural” plenums. From the fall of 1960 to June 1964, the first secretary submitted twelve memoranda to the Central Committee Presidium on various problems of agricultural development, each of which was discussed and in some cases even distributed locally as guidance for local party organizations. Even so, the designation is—especially with reference to the late 1950s and the early 1960s, when Khrushchev had to all intents and purposes established a personal dictatorship—entirely apposite and as justified as, say, “Stalin’s collectivization,” “Lenin’s New Economic Policy (NEP),” or “Gorbachev’s reforms.”

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Professor Il'ia Evgen'evich Zelenin, Doctor of History, is leading research fellow at the Institute of Russian History, Russian Academy of Sciences.

Khrushchev did not do well as a reformer. After having had his “time in the sun” in 1953–58 and having tried his hand at orchestrating a “Great Decade,” his authority began to ebb in the early 1960s. After his removal from power, he was consigned to oblivion, which naturally affected historical study of his agrarian policy. The conditions for an objective investigation into that topic began to fall into place in the early 1990s with the publication of the stenographic records of the Central Committee plenums in June 1957 and October 1964, documents on the events in Novocherkassk (*Istoricheskii arkhiv*, 1993–94), selections of documents from the Archive of the President of the Russian Federation and the Central Archive of the Federal Security Service (FSB) (*Sovetskie arkhivy*, *Istochnik*, the *Neizvestnaia Rossiia XX* v. anthologies), and more. Fundamentally important was the declassification of some documents from what had been the Politburo’s current archive (now the Center for the Preservation of Contemporary Documentation [TsKhSD]), which included stenographic records of Central Committee plenums and documents from the Central Committee’s agricultural and general departments. Also of considerable significance was the reissue of Khrushchev’s eight-volume *The Building of Communism in the USSR and the Development of Agriculture* [Stroitel’stvo kommunizma v SSSR i razvitie sel’skogo khoziaistva], published during his lifetime (Moscow, 1962–64) and essentially still neglected by historians, and the memoirs of the pensioned-off Khrushchev, which he had dictated in his declining years (*Voprosy istorii*, 1990–95).

Contemporary studies are sparse, and for good reason: the unrestrained praise showered on Khrushchev the reformer during his tenure in power gave way to twenty years during which people forgot about his brainchild—the virgin lands saga and the assignment of “all supervisory services” in the development and implementation of that program to Brezhnev—and even studiously avoided it, which lasted to the late 1980s. Historians wearied by the shifting assessments and viewpoints of their ideological mentors lost all interest in the topic.

The 1990s saw the publication of a study by M.A. Beznin and L.N. Denisova on the peasantry and the rural areas of Russia’s non-black-earth lands and a more far-reaching monograph by O.M. Verbitskaia that covered the early postwar years and the initial stage of the Khrushchev reforms.¹ A particular place in the literature of the 1990s belongs to a synoptic study on Russia’s agrarian science and policy from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries by Academician Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Nikonov, who from 1951 to 1961 was Latvia’s minister of agriculture and attended Central Committee plenums held during that period, including the “virgin lands” plenum of February–March 1954, which according to the record he also addressed. Nikonov’s book reveals that the future academician and president of the All-Union Academy of

Agricultural Sciences lost his ministerial position shortly after an “exchange of opinions” on the subject of corn with Khrushchev, who had unexpectedly descended on Latvia. “You do not love corn,” the head of the Party and the state concluded. Nikonov has no desire to “settle scores” retrospectively (as can be detected in the memoirs of Dmitrii Trofimovich Shepilov) with his former “interlocutor.” Rather, he describes Khrushchev objectively, as a man and a politician, and gives his reforms, including the conquest of the virgin lands, high marks overall.²

In this article, I dwell on some of the topic’s more currently relevant problems, based on new fundamental documents and new approaches.

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First, I would like to say a few words about agricultural statistics from the 1950s and the 1960s and their reliability and objectivity, since they are the only basis on which we may draw conclusions regarding the process and results of Khrushchev’s agrarian reforms and render a competent judgment on his agrarian policy.

Khrushchev frequently criticized Grigorii Malenkov for having announced, in his report to the Nineteenth Party Congress, that based on yield data by crop variety, the USSR’s grain supply problem had been “resolved once and for all.” On instructions from the Party’s new leader, the Central Statistical Directorate [TsSU], from the late 1950s on, published economic digests containing data about actual and gross grain yields. It also recalculated the cost indices for gross agricultural output, which it published in the form of a dynamic series in special agricultural digests issued in 1960 and 1971. The 1971 edition, for the first time since 1936, explained the methodology behind the calculation of the crop and livestock production indices. Brezhnev and Gorbachev were guided by those data in describing the development of agriculture in the USSR during the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s in reports to Central Committee plenums in March 1965 and March 1989. Economists and historians have, by and large, confirmed the objectivity of those statistics.³

At the same time, the digests stopped far short of incorporating all the statistical data on agriculture available to the TsSU, which included fuller information, gathered annually and over a number of years, on production and financial activity on collective and state farms and documentation from budgetary studies conducted with collective-farm families, state-farm workers, and so on—forwarded to the Central Committee’s Agricultural Department and personally to Khrushchev, under the signature of TsSU head Vladimir Nikonovich Starovskii. Further proof of the reliability of those numbers comes from a comparison with the data published in the digests.

Now for the Central Committee plenums on agriculture, whose stenographic records have only recently been made available to scholars. We must give Khrushchev his due: he renewed a tradition, interrupted by Stalin, of publishing the stenographic records of Central Committee plenums, most of which appeared immediately after the meeting in question. Unfortunately, however, there were exceptions, including several on the subject of agriculture, among them the renowned September 1953 plenum, the February–March “virgin lands” plenum in 1954, and a January 1955 plenum that reviewed problems of livestock farming. But what secrets were hidden there? To answer that question, one must be inducted into the political finagling in the Kremlin.

A comparison of the stenographic record of Khrushchev’s report to the September 1953 plenum with the published text shows that the most scathingly negative propositions and conclusions, along with the materials to back them up, did not find their way into print. These omissions included comparative data on livestock productivity in the USSR and the leading Western countries, which led to the conclusion that our livestock numbers were essentially stuck at prerevolutionary levels, as was per capita food consumption. The “superiority” of socialism was not easy to find. The version of the report printed in the newspapers omitted such “rough spots,” naturally without any admission of the cuts. But there were even more serious reasons not to publish the full stenographic record.

The first secretary clearly disliked the speeches delivered at the plenum by several secretaries of local party organizations, in which they, as if adding to his report, noted that its measures for agricultural development took their cue from a speech made by Malenkov at a Supreme Soviet meeting in August 1953 and from the resolutions adopted there. For instance, Nedosekin, secretary of the Tula oblast committee, noted: “The collective farmers and the workers in the machine-tractor stations and the state farms gave an enthusiastic reception to the measures of our Party and state articulated in Comrade Malenkov’s speech at the Fifth Session of the USSR Supreme Soviet and to the law on agricultural taxes enacted at that session.”⁷⁴ Remarkably, some of the points made in Khrushchev’s report to the plenum had been lifted almost verbatim from Malenkov’s speech without, of course, referring to it.

Another issue considered at the September plenum but omitted from its officially published documentation was “The Election of Comrade Khrushchev as First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Central Committee” [Ob izbranii t. Khrushcheva pervym sekretarem TsK KPSS]. On behalf of the Central Committee Presidium, Malenkov, who was chairing the plenum, nominated Khrushchev in a terse phrase that lacked the lavish praise normal in such instances. He lamented the fact that “at present the Central Committee has no first secretary” and characterized Khrushchev as a “true

disciple of Lenin, Stalin's closest confederate, who has both enormous experience in the sphere of party building and a profound knowledge of our people." The election was unanimous.⁵ Since Malenkov was still premier and one of the most influential members of the Central Committee Presidium, a fight between him and Khrushchev over leadership was guaranteed. For that reason, Khrushchev did not care to have the press spread it about that Malenkov had nominated him as first secretary of the Central Committee.

The stenographic record of the February–March 1954 plenum contains just as many "hidden currents." For example, a speech by Panteleimon Kondrat'evich Ponomarenko, the new first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan who had replaced Zhumabai Shaiakhmetov earlier in the year, revealed that Khrushchev first broached the question of opening up the virgin lands of Kazakhstan with the republic's leadership the day after the September plenum's adjournment; and the question came directly and personally from him, without any previous discussion with the members of the Central Committee plenum or the republic's leaders. Those leaders (Shaiakhmetov in particular) argued that "bringing virgin and fallow lands under the plow would violate the interests of the indigenous Kazakh inhabitants, since it would deprive them of livestock pasturage." But after the dismissal of those leaders, "what Ponomarenko called a most detrimental theory, both ridiculous and obsolete, was exposed and overturned at the Central Committee plenum and at the Eighth Congress of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan." This exposure happened because, on Khrushchev's instructions, the first and second secretaries of the Kazakh Central Committee had been swiftly voted out and replaced by two "outsiders," Ponomarenko the Belorussian and Brezhnev the Ukrainian.⁶

Although not delving into the details of this complex problem, the new party leader in Kazakhstan, a former general-lieutenant and head of the partisans' Central Staff during the war, not only fully supported Khrushchev's program but even suggested that Kazakhstan and Ukraine compete head to head on the volume of grain deliveries to the state. But Khrushchev was surprised at the February–March plenum by the serious criticisms of the program to open up the virgin lands that came from scientific specialists on dry farming (Professor M.G. Chizhevskii, the field experimenter T.S. Mal'tsev, and others). They recommended, from the initial opening of the virgin lands, the use of fallow crop rotation and perennial grasses, the combination of grain and livestock production, and fine-tilling of the land. They also underscored the huge significance of letting the land lie full fallow. Khrushchev rejected those recommendations outright and instead supported the incompetent advice given by Trofim Lysenko, president of the All-Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences, to "plow deep, turning good furrows."⁷

The “secret” of the January 1955 Central Committee plenum was its focus on not only livestock production but also the matter of Comrade Malenkov, a detail not revealed to plenum attendees until after the session began. Khrushchev, the lead speaker, started the ball rolling by reading a draft resolution that “wholly approved” the assessment that “Comrade Malenkov is not fulfilling the duties of chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers and is organizing the work of the Council of Ministers poorly, while not showing himself to be a sufficiently mature and steady Bolshevik leader.” An itemization of specific complaints—like a bill of indictment—against the head of state followed: his speech to the Fifth Session of the Supreme Soviet contained sweeping but economically ill-substantiated promises more reminiscent of a parliamentary declaration aimed at currying favor; he had allowed a theoretically incorrect and politically damaging contrast between the tempos of development in heavy industry and those in light industry and the food industry; he had turned the forced development of light industry into his slogan; having supervised agriculture for a number of years, he bore political responsibility for the serious backwardness of that branch of the economy; and, after the post of chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers was separated from that of first secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, he manifestly aspired not only to supervise the activity of the government but also to oversee the Presidium of the Central Committee.

P.K. Ponomarenko, V.M. Molotov, and L.M. Kaganovich also criticized Malenkov. The plenum passed the resolution unanimously and, as a reward for admitting his errors, allowed Malenkov to remain a member of the Central Committee Presidium.⁸

Khrushchev’s victory during this last phase of the struggle for power was impressive but far from definitive. Ahead lay the Twentieth Party Congress and the June 1957 plenum—fraught with particular danger for the party leader but at which he again triumphed, this time gaining the long-awaited post of premier.

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A central element in Khrushchev’s agrarian policy involved the personal subsidiary plots [*lichnye podsobnyye khoziaistva*, LPKh] owned by collective farmers, state-farm workers, and townsfolk. Prompted by Marx’s famous thesis on the superiority of large-scale social production in agriculture and the bleak future for small-proprietor production, Khrushchev, as a matter of principle, opposed having peasants on collective farms and, even more so, state-farm workers and townsfolk working their own plots. On several occasions he cited Lenin, who had introduced into the Law on Socialist Land

Utilization [Zakon o sotsialisticheskogo zemleustroistva] (February 1919, in the midst of the Civil War) a paragraph, number 46, that categorically forbade blue- and white-collar workers on state farms from owning animals, poultry, and vegetable plots. “Why was that paragraph put into the law?” Lenin asked, while explaining the decision to the hungry agricultural workers of Petrograd province, who objected to it. “To establish socialized labor in a socialized economy. Because if we again bring in vegetable plots, separately owned animals, poultry, and so on, then it will all likely revert to the small-scale farming that we have had up to this point.”⁹

In the last years of Stalin’s life and pursuant to his instructions, peasant households had seen a significant increase in their tax burden, and the mandatory deliveries of produce to the state proved devastating to them. The owners of attached allotments [*priusadebnye khoziaistva*] were forced to slaughter livestock and fell trees that, productive or not, were individually taxed.¹⁰ Only after the dictator’s death, in late March 1953, did the USSR People’s Commissariat of Finance venture to present to Malenkov, the new head of state, a briefing memorandum showing how extremely onerous the taxation of personal subsidiary plots had become: from 1949 through 1952, tax revenue from those plots had grown from 8,645,000,000 to 9,996,000,000 rubles or from 419 to 528 rubles per household.¹¹

For several years after Khrushchev came to power (until late 1958), he had to set his own ideological views aside and position himself as an active defender of personal subsidiary plots for collective farmers, state-farm workers, and townfolk, following the policy introduced by Malenkov.

A resolution adopted at the September 1953 Central Committee plenum lifted from the attached allotments the requirement to deliver meat to the state and wrote off delivery arrears accrued in previous years. It also created conditions for the acquisition of individually owned livestock. On 4 July 1957 the Central Committee and the USSR Council of Ministers adopted a resolution abolishing mandatory deliveries of agricultural products to the state from personal subsidiary plots owned by collective farmers, state-farm workers, and townfolk. Those in favor argued that individual plots made a negligible contribution to deliveries of agricultural products, since 81–89 percent of the state’s meat, milk, and wool came from the socialized economy of collective and state farms.¹² At the December 1958 Central Committee plenum, which discussed net agricultural development over the previous five years, however, Khrushchev proposed reductions in the size of attached allotments and the number of heads of livestock individually owned by state-farm workers. “The large attached plots and large number of individually owned livestock,” Khrushchev stated, “has become a serious obstacle to the development of production.” In his opinion, the state farms could now provide all their workers

with all the agricultural produce they needed. Citing an initiative advanced by blue- and white-collar workers in leading enterprises, he proposed that “gradually, in the near future,” the state farms should “purchase the livestock of their blue- and white-collar workers.” A plenum decree recorded this proposal in the form of a party directive that set a firm schedule of two to three years to sell the livestock.¹³

Khrushchev touched on collective farmers’ personal subsidiary plots [LPKh] in the same report, although admittedly from a different angle. After complaining that the “income received from personal subsidiary plots still constitutes a significant portion of a collective-farm family’s budget,” he noted that “with the growth of the socialized economy on the collective farms, personal farming is gradually declining.” He cited the example of collective farmers in the village of Kalinovka (Khomutovka raion, Kursk oblast) who, on the advice of their famous compatriot [Khrushchev—Trans.], had sold their individually owned cows to the collective farms and as a result were now living better lives. The collective farm won, too. “That work,” he emphasized, “needs a deft hand and must not be achieved by administrative order, by prescription from above,” but must happen only when the collective farmers themselves are convinced that their material situation would not be worsened but improved by the sale of their cows. The plenum decree contained no recommendations on that score.

Speaking in Riazan shortly after the plenum (in February 1959), Khrushchev emphatically condemned what the leaders of several collective farms had done in launching the mass purchase of farmers’ cows. “That is not right,” he observed. “Such an undertaking may be attempted only on those collective farms where socialized livestock production is well developed and the collective farmers’ demands for milk can be met.”¹⁴

In terms of its officially announced agenda, the June 1959 Central Committee plenum did not relate directly to agriculture, since the issue slated for discussion involved the acceleration of technical progress in the manufacturing and construction industries. Even so, when Khrushchev opened the plenum, he decided to speak his piece on agricultural matters “of enormous importance,” on which an “exchange of views in the Central Committee Presidium” had taken place. Above all, he mentioned the advisability of passing a law to prohibit townfolk from owning livestock (cows, goats, and pigs). As of 1 January 1958, as mentioned above, livestock owners in towns and urban settlements no longer had to make mandatory deliveries to the state, which had led to an increase in livestock head counts. Khrushchev saw this as very dangerous. “In essence,” he said, “channels have been opened for townfolk to feed their livestock enormous quantities of grain.” Speculators were making a fortune on cheap state-supplied grain. It would, he reasoned, be politically improper

to raise grain prices, since that would impinge on the interests of millions of working people. But he expressed a certainty that the collective and state farms could satisfy the state's requirements for livestock products, which rendered urban livestock superfluous. So he proposed forbidding townsfolk from keeping cows, goats, and pigs. He especially disliked goats, "which are, furthermore, the enemy of urban parks."¹⁵

The plenum attendees supported his proposal, and from 30 July to 15 August 1959 the Supreme Soviet presidiums in the union republics (12 August in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic [RSFSR]) adopted decrees barring citizens living in towns, cities, and urban settlements from personally owning any livestock.¹⁶

The party directives went into effect in the localities even before the accompanying legislation passed, but in a way that egregiously violated even the instructions given in Khrushchev's published speech to the December 1958 plenum. Individually owned livestock "procured" from collective farmers (as mentioned in Khrushchev's 1959 Riazan speech) was, to all intents and purposes, also seized for little or nothing, in fulfillment of the collective farmers' meat-delivery obligations. State-farm workers were told that they would have to give up their livestock in a matter of months and, if they refused, their pasturage would be confiscated. State-farm workers, collective farmers, and townsfolk generated a stream of letters complaining about the arbitrariness of local authorities and farm managers. Some of the letters even used the term "dekulakization" [*raskulachivanie*].

The editors of the newspaper *Sel'skaia zhizn'* forwarded such letters to the Central Committee's Agriculture Department. They became the basis for informational bulletins and for reports submitted to the Central Committee and personally to Khrushchev on "measures taken," often mere pro forma steps that did not address the heart of the problem.

For example, in June 1959, P. Semenov, deputy head of the Agriculture Department, informed the first secretary that letters from a number of territories and regions (Krasnodar krai, Kaluga, Moscow, Kalinin, Kursk, and Kirov oblasts, and elsewhere) contained "information on flaws in the purchase of livestock from collective farmers and state-farm workers." "The respective krai and oblast party committees have reported that some of the facts laid out in those letters have been confirmed whereas others have not. Party, soviet, and agricultural agencies in the localities have taken steps to eliminate the shortcomings noted in the letters from working people."¹⁷ The complaints, though, were handled by the targets of those complaints: the local bosses agreed with some things, contested others, and, of course, assured the Central Committee that they had indeed taken measures to eliminate the flaws.

In a comparable briefing note written in late August 1959, F. Krest'ianinov, head of the Central Committee's Agriculture Department for the Union Republics, informed Khrushchev that "most letters from working people fervently approved" his statements "on the issue of prohibiting townsfolk and workers in the urban settlements from individually owning livestock."¹⁸ The note, however, reflected the views of townsfolk who owned no livestock and were outraged that those who did could feed their animals with cheap state-supplied grain. Other responses came from the citizens (in towns, cities, and urban settlements) whose interests were being violated. Krest'ianinov ignored their views, brushing them off with the usual cliché about universal support and approval, knowing that the recipient would enjoy reading that. It would also remove any need to take steps to detail the Party's "wise" decisions to the public.

Khrushchev unquestionably made a serious error in initiating and implementing legislation that ran contrary to the principles of agrarian policy defined at the September 1953 plenum. In part, he let himself be misled by certain "analysts" in the Central Committee's Agriculture Department who, all else aside, had no data on personal subsidiary plots in urban areas at their disposal (the regime had collected none). But the error rested on much more than that. Khrushchev had, in my view, also succumbed to the *hypnosis of self-deception*, convincing himself and others that the personal plots would soon become irrelevant and cede to the socialized economy. For these purposes, the authorities invariably utilized data on the commodities produced on personal subsidiary plots, the growing contribution of collective and state farms to produce deliveries to the state, and the decisive role played by the socialist sector in providing the country with agricultural output, while ignoring information on the gross output of personal plots.

The reality was altogether different. We summarize below what the agrarian economist N.Ia. Itskov (an outside consultant to the Central Committee's Agriculture Department) wrote on this subject in April 1962, in an analytical memorandum addressed to Khrushchev. In late 1959, he said, the collective farmers' personal plots produced 50–80 percent of the collective-farm sector's gross output of milk, meat, potatoes and other vegetables, and eggs. From 1953 to 1959 the socialized economy of the collective farms increased its share by only 2–5 percent. "It will take many years to supersede the productivity of personal subsidiary plots in vegetables, potatoes, meat, and lard." The state was not equipped to make additional provision for a population that amounted to half the country's inhabitants. He calculated that it would "take eight to ten years before that would be possible." Overall, he concluded: "This question has been prematurely posed and is making the collective farmers and the blue- and white-collar workers uneasy. . . . One

must exercise caution in reducing the number of personal plots and even more so in abolishing them.”¹⁹

An analysis of agricultural data in statistical digests (the livestock head count on the personal subsidiary plots of collective farmers and blue- and white-collar workers for 1954–64; the production of livestock products, potatoes, and other vegetables for 1953–59; the contribution made by personal plots to the production of livestock products in the late 1950s and the first half of the 1960s) shows that the vagaries of Khrushchev’s agrarian policy became manifest in the economic indices for personal plots owned by state-farm workers and townfolk, as well as collective farmers, as early as the end of the 1950s—especially in 1962, when Khrushchev’s crackdown on individual owners of livestock had its full impact and retail prices for meat, meat products, and dairy products rose significantly, and in 1963, when (in part due to crop failures) grain had to be imported.

At that time, though, personal subsidiary plot production did not substantially decrease; nor did the proportion of those plots in agriculture as a whole (with the exception of livestock owners in towns, cities, and worker settlements). Here the large reserves of strength created in 1953–58 and the ability of provincials to adapt to the whims of politicians came into play. Throughout the Khrushchev period, personal plots were the main producers of potatoes, other vegetables, and eggs and of about half of the country’s meat, meat products, and dairy products.

According to the statistics, personal subsidiary plots in 1961–64 produced 42–44 percent of the meat, 42–45 percent of the milk, 73–76 percent of the eggs, and 71–79 percent of the wool.²⁰ Collective-farm markets sold part of that output, but the families of collective farmers, state-farm workers, and townfolk consumed most of it, which significantly improved their nutritional status.

The law restricted personal subsidiary plots among state-farm workers beginning in the late 1950s, after the outright prohibition imposed on inhabitants of towns, cities, and worker settlements. To a degree, such exercises also impinged on collective farmers, in whose success local authorities had a heavy investment because of the foolhardy program “to catch up with and overtake America” in the per capita production of meat, milk, and butter that Khrushchev announced in the spring of 1957.

Budgetary study data attest that the aggregate income of collective-farm families in the RSFSR during the late 1950s and the early 1960s came in equal amounts (42–43 percent each) from attached allotments and the socialized economy. Working cooperatively in the ancillary economy, which made efficient use of every family member, collective-farm peasants could keep their families viable by continuing to bring in fairly high and stable incomes.²¹

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In beginning his agrarian reforms, Khrushchev gave priority to resolving the grain problem. Yet he had certainly focused on this topic at the September 1953 plenum. He raised the need to increase crop yields only at the end of his speech, while noting agriculture's achievements with comments such as "in a relatively short time, we have revitalized grain farming," and the "country basically has enough grain, and the necessary state stockpiles are in place."²² Within a few months, however, in a memorandum to the Central Committee Presidium on "Ways of Solving the Grain Problem" [Puti resheniia zernovoi problemy] dated 22 January 1954, Khrushchev—now first secretary of the Central Committee (and precisely because now he could)—effectively blew the whole thing up. "Further study of the state of agriculture and grain procurements," he began, "demonstrates that our declared resolution of the grain problem [a blatant allusion to Malenkov's announcement at the Nineteenth Party Congress—I.Z.] does not conform to the actual state of affairs in this country regarding the provision of grain." In 1953, he emphasized, the situation was critical: 1.85 billion poods [over 30 million metric tons—Trans.] of grain had been procured in that year (about the same as in 1948) and effectively 1.926 billion poods had been consumed, resulting in the release of 160 million poods from the state stockpiles, which was "unacceptable." To solve this problem, Khrushchev said, "it is essential to explore the feasibility of sharply increasing grain production." He specified as an "important and real resource" the opening up of 13 million hectares of virgin and fallow land to the east—in Kazakhstan, western Siberia, the Volga region, and the Urals—in 1954 and 1955.²³ This effectively revised commitments made at the September 1953 plenum regarding the consistent intensification of agricultural production, especially of grain, or at least boosting that production with far-reaching measures. "We have," Khrushchev emphasized, "to buy time. We need not only to obtain more grain but also to spend as little time as possible obtaining that grain."²⁴

From 1954 to 1960, 41.8 million hectares of virgin and fallow lands went under the plow: 25.5 million in Kazakhstan, 11.1 million in Siberia and the Far East, 2.9 million in the Urals, and 2.3 million in the Volga region. When harvests were good, the state's silos took in 50–60 percent of all grain harvested—and in an average year, over 40 percent—from the virgin lands (known as zones of "risky agriculture"). The East became a major base for the production of grain and later of livestock products. We must note that the opening of the virgin lands involved overcoming enormous difficulties, trial and error, mastering a new system of agriculture (which scientists had recommended but Khrushchev had not supported at the February–March 1954

plenum), and battling weeds and wind erosion. Ultimately, Khrushchev had to agree with the specialists, thus effectively acknowledging his own incompetence in such matters.²⁵

By the late 1950s and the early 1960s, the grain problem had been resolved in principle, mostly by opening virgin lands. The average annual grain harvest in 1954–58 was 113.2 million tons, versus 80.9 million tons in 1949–53, with yields of 9.2 centners [920 kilograms—Trans.] per hectare against 7.7. The state took in 43.6 million and 32.8 million tons, respectively. “Such a quantity of grain,” Khrushchev remarked in a report to the Central Committee plenum in December 1958 (in wording that found its way into a plenum decree), “our country has never had in all its history.”²⁶

In subsequent years, however, the situation began to deteriorate, even though in 1959–64, compared with the previous Five-Year Plan, gross harvests and state procurements of grain increased (the former to 129.3 million tons against 113.2 million tons, the latter to 52.5 million tons against 43.6 million tons, while the yield grew to 10.4 centners per hectare against 9.2).²⁷ Yet grain production increasingly lagged behind the requirements of both people and livestock. In the critical year of 1963, for the first time in the postwar years (including 1946 and 1947), the country had to purchase massive amounts of grain from abroad. Unfavorable weather conditions had, it must be said, taken a toll on the harvests: “A harsh winter followed by a fierce drought,” Khrushchev said at the December 1963 Central Committee plenum, “has damaged the country’s crucial agricultural regions. . . . Millions of hectares of winter crops have perished.” The country’s gross harvest fell to 107.5 million tons against 140.2 million in 1962 (a drop of almost 30 percent), while yield dipped from 10.9 centners per hectare to 8.3.²⁸ All calculations of a significant increase in grain procurements collapsed.

Yet this situation did not appear suddenly. It had been, as it were, developing since the late 1950s, when grain outlays began to exceed grain procurements and the state’s grain stockpile—its untouchable reserves—started to shrink. In 1960, for instance, grain procurements, outlay, and the state stockpile stood, respectively, at 46.7 million, 50 million, and 10.2 million tons and in 1963, at 44.8 million, 51.2 million, and 6.3 million tons.²⁹ Grain outlays thus systematically surpassed grain procurements during the unhappily remembered Seven-Year Plan [1959–65—Trans.], which inevitably reduced state stockpiles and, as a result of having to import grain, shrank the country’s gold reserve. Data collected by Rudol’f Pikhoia show that 372.2 tons of gold (over a third of the total reserves) went to purchase food in 1963 and 335.3 tons in 1965.³⁰

At the December 1963 plenum, Khrushchev was bemused: “We find people who wonder how previously, with smaller gross grain harvests, we could sell grain, but now we’re buying it. What can we say to such people?”

Had we pursued the Stalin–Molotov method of securing grain for the public, even this year we would have been able to sell grain abroad. This approach entailed selling grain abroad while in some districts, due to the grain shortage, people swelled up with hunger and even died.”³¹ Khrushchev was, of course, correct: in an emergency (natural disasters, mass famine, war), the state has not only the right but the duty to save lives by releasing supplies from the state food reserves—that is why they exist. When the situation stabilizes, the reserves can be built up again. The “we will go hungry, but we will export” principle is immoral. From the early 1960s on, the state’s grain stockpiles were not only not restored but shrank steadily, and after 1963 the import of grain became a kind of natural law. In that year, 9.4 million tons of grain—or about 10 percent of the gross harvest—was purchased.³² The same “quota” was retained in subsequent years, since Khrushchev’s retirement brought no change to the “grain import operations.”

This phenomenon stands in need of explanation. Why did the problem of mass grain imports not arise before the 1960s, even when crops failed, and why did it come up only in later years, when the grain sector was not only continually growing but, as a rule, never fell below 1958 levels (the year of the highest gross harvests, yield, and grain procurements)? Here the demographic factor played a major role, it seems to me: more accurately, increased migration, including spontaneous migrations, from the countryside to the towns. This movement intensified from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, as the agrarian reforms lost traction and the situation worsened in rural areas.

Immediately after the war (until the early 1950s), the change in population numbers was dominated by regenerative (“compensatory,” in demographic jargon) factors, in the countryside and in the country as a whole. These factors included military demobilization, the repatriation of prisoners of war and of noncombatants who had been herded into Germany, and a rising birth rate. In 1956 and 1957 (after the Twentieth Party Congress), people from the North Caucasus and the Volga region who had been deported during the war on orders from Stalin and the KGB—Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks, Volga Germans, and others, more than half of whom had lived in rural areas and had worked in agriculture and animal husbandry—returned home. During the Khrushchev reforms of the 1950s, the trained personnel of the collective and state farms was replenished by the dispatch of individuals from the towns (the “thirty thousand volunteers”) to serve as chairmen on collective farms; by staff transfers of agricultural specialists who had previously worked in various departments, administrations, and ministries to the collective and state farms; and by the assignment of graduates from agricultural postsecondary institutions and technical colleges, mechanization schools, and so on to the collective and state farms and machine-tractor stations. The mid-1950s saw the return of some who

had lived in the countryside but left to join other branches of the economy or had completed their agricultural education in an urban area and stayed there. The agrarian reforms persuaded many to change their attitudes toward the countryside, and many more responded to the authorities' exhortations and promises. The flow of settlers from the towns and cities gained momentum especially in connection with the opening of the virgin lands.

At the same time, particularly in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, the migration of the rural population to towns and cities continued apace, which undermined the internal passport regime in urban areas after the Twentieth Party Congress. From February 1958 on, rural residents—including peasants, whom a decree of the Central Executive Committee and Council of People's Commissars had stripped of their right to hold an internal passport on 27 December 1932—were gradually brought into the internal passport system. Local law enforcement issued temporary passports to collective-farm residents traveling to other regions, territories, and republics for seasonal work [*otkhodniki*] and to those who moved from the countryside to the town to take up regular work, to study, and so on. Before then, a rural resident moving to an urban area had had to make do with a certificate from the collective-farm chairman (if that individual agreed to the move) or the rural soviet.³³

Rural–urban migration is generally progressive, the norm for highly developed societies with industrial economies. It also reflects to some extent the development of productive forces in the agrarian sector and the increasing productivity of peasant labor. But even in the 1953–58 period, those were neither driving nor definitive factors in the USSR, and at the end of the 1950s, their impact actually lessened. The migration was predominantly spontaneous and uncontrolled by the authorities. Other factors in play here included the negative consequences of reorganizing the machine-tractor stations, the infringement of the interests of those who owned attached allotments, gross errors committed by local authorities during the conversion of collective farms into state farms, and the resettlement of the rural population initiated by Khrushchev himself.

Demographic statistics indicate that from 1960 to 1964, almost seven million people, mostly former collective farmers, moved from the countryside to an urban area. In 1961 the balance of urban and rural populations shifted for the first time (to favor the towns); by the end of that year, the percentages were 51 percent and 49 percent, respectively. A year later, they stood at 52 percent and 48 percent, and by 1964 they had hit 53 percent and 47 percent. In the opinion of V.P. Popov, the almost seven million peasants who “fled the countryside” in 1960–64 did so mainly as a result of the consolidation of collective farms and the resettlement of the rural population.³⁴

I note in this regard that relative to the late 1950s and the early 1960s,

when the peasants began receiving passports (albeit temporary ones), the term “flight from the countryside” did not correspond to the new reality. The peasants had essentially been granted the legal and actual right to choose where they would live and work. Although they preferred towns and cities, their response grew out of other factors besides the consolidation of collective farms and villages.

Young people on collective farms—who at the age of sixteen were automatically, whether they submitted an application or not, registered as collective-farm members—were not exactly burning with a desire to graduate from school and go straight into the kind of backbreaking labor that occupied their parents—especially in animal husbandry, where the work was mostly undermechanized (all too often manual) and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. By fair means or foul, the youngsters were bound and determined to get to an urban area, as students, after completing their military service, after their term of organized recruitment [*orgnabor*] was up, and so on. Even in 1953–58 a person engaged in physical work in a town or city had more prospects, was better paid, and had a better social safety net than on a collective farm. Not to mention the level of cultural services available to urban residents and their chances of having a decent personal life. Furthermore, the class of “collective-farm peasants”—despite all the theoretical postulates on the equal rights of workers and peasants (with the former taking the “leading role”), their “indestructible friendship,” and so forth—was still disadvantaged and even seen as second rate.

S.P. Pavlov, first secretary of the Komsomol Central Committee, crisply characterized the situation of rural youth in the first half of the 1960s in a speech to a Central Committee plenum in March 1965. “Young people,” he emphasized, “are leaving the villages. . . . The population of those aged seventeen to twenty-nine in rural areas has shrunk in recent years by six million. The average age of those working on many collective farms at present tops fifty.”³⁵ Provisional as the numbers are, a comparison of the overall indices of rural migration in those years (seven million) with the part played by young people in that migration (six million, or more than 85 percent) shows that the vast majority of “fugitives” was young. Young people, by migrating to urban areas, availed themselves of the right, limited but real, to choose their occupation and place of residence. The end result was not only a growth in the numbers of urban consumers of agricultural output but also, and far more dangerously, a decline in the productivity of the rural economy that tied in with the graying of its population.

Khrushchev’s “metaprogram” for the resettlement of the rural population and the construction of agrocities primarily focused on young people, the rising generation, and undoubtedly had a kernel of sense in it, but it had

inadequate material support and poor timing. The reformer's plans significantly exceeded the state's potential, but the young people neither would nor could wait for long.

Another factor is the significant rise in the demand for food both in urban areas and in the countryside. So, for instance, collective-farm families surpassed their prewar level of nutrition, in terms of the most calorie-rich foods, by the mid-1950s; and in 1958 they consumed six times more sugar, three times more pastries and fish, and twice as much meat as they had in 1940. Levels of consumption in worker families (even after the 1962 price increase) were considerably higher.³⁶

Among factors holding back agricultural development, we must not forget the diversion of vast resources from the agrarian sector to the military-industrial complex and the entanglement of the USSR, Khrushchev's innumerable declarations of peaceful intent notwithstanding, in an arms race with the United States. A vivid example of this is the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. In his declining years, the "personal pensioner of unionwide standing" was compelled to admit that the country's accelerated missile building had had its "negative aspects," in that it had "frittered away money from the budget for no good reason and exhausted our financial potential."³⁷

For both objective and subjective reasons, therefore, agricultural production, including grain production (its leading sector), fell ever farther behind the needs of the public during the Seven-Year Plan and failed to meet the need for livestock fodder. The grain problem that Khrushchev had rashly declared resolved in late 1958 escalated again. The USSR had to make its first large-scale and exorbitantly expensive grain purchases abroad in 1963, and these continued in subsequent years.

But there was no crisis in grain production, or in any other branch of agriculture during the Seven-Year Plan. In fact, agricultural production rose steadily, although the rate of growth in gross and marketable output slowed. There was, though, a *crisis of consumption*, an acute shortfall of the grain and livestock branches relative to the public's needs. That resulted primarily from serious miscalculations in agrarian policy on the part of Khrushchev, who had been unable to evaluate correctly the nature and depth of the deconstruction occurring in the countryside and to correct or mitigate the situation in a timely manner.

* * *

The "socialist system of agriculture," which took shape after the Stalinist collectivization of the 1930s and was crushed and half-suffocated by a necrotic totalitarian regime in the early 1950s, was almost immune to reform. The

attempts of Khrushchev and certain other “seekers of truth” in the Stalinist leadership during the early 1950s to alleviate that regime somewhat in the interests of the peasants (to reduce the tax burden, to dispense with the grain farmer’s “first commandment” [to supply grain to the state—Trans.], to institute elements of economic accountability [*khozraschet*] into the collective- and state-farm system, etc.) encountered complete incomprehension and active resistance from the Leader. After his death, the newly installed Khrushchev endeavored to create conditions that would bring the country and its long-suffering peasantry back to life.

The first five-year plan after the September 1953 plenum was Khrushchev’s most successful and effective period. During that time, agrarian reform aimed at resolving economic and social problems in the countryside that were overdue for solution (giving the peasantry and the state-farm and machine-tractor station workers more independence in planning and strengthening production, instituting the principle of giving workers a material interest in their work, beginning to issue internal passports in the countryside, etc.). Results came swiftly. Khrushchev had every justification for announcing at the Central Committee plenum in December 1958 that a “giant leap” had been made “in the development of agriculture” (since gross output had grown by almost 50 percent and marketable output by 80 percent, and livestock output had almost doubled).

But the powerful positive payload of the agrarian reforms undertaken pursuant to decisions made at the September plenum and subsequent enactments had basically been depleted by the end of the 1950s. The lack of thought given to a number of decisions and party directives and the dilatoriness in tackling the shortcomings and costs of reform had taken their toll. So, for instance, the reorganization of the machine-tractor stations (February–March 1958), one of Khrushchev’s most progressive and most antitotalitarian socioeconomic reforms, produced some extremely negative consequences due to its impossibly tight deadlines (where, instead of taking the three years envisaged by law, the restructuring was “packed” into one). Those consequences included the disruption of the repair facilities at the former machine-tractor stations, the great losses suffered by especially weak collective farms in purchasing technology, and an “outflow” of well-trained farm-machinery operators, and they took several years to overcome.

Among the reasons for “jumping the gun” in that way was ideological tunnel vision, a faith in the inviolability of socialist principles, and in the inevitability that those principles would morph into the principles of communism in the not-too-distant future. The first harbinger of this was a resolution passed by the Twenty-First Party Congress on the control numbers [*kontrol’nye tsifry*] for the Seven-Year Plan (February 1959), followed by the new platform adopted by the Twenty-Second Congress in October 1961.

Another reason was Khrushchev's one-man rule, which was evolving within the higher party leadership and manifested in full measure at the Central Committee plenum in December 1959, where reports and speeches were made that unanimously praised and fully endorsed Khrushchev's supervision of agriculture. The term "our dear Nikita Sergeevich" became common parlance, and the encomiums lavished on him were routinely accompanied by "prolonged applause."³⁸ In less than two years the ritual that brought all plenum members to their feet in a standing ovation when the party leader was being praised had returned. Khrushchev acquired full oversight of agriculture, and the agricultural achievements of 1959 and 1960 were patently overstated.

Khrushchev realized this in the fall of 1960. In a memorandum to the Central Committee Presidium dated 29 September 1960, he warned against "complacency, smugness, and conceit over the first successes in the development of agriculture" and felt compelled to acknowledge the situation in livestock rearing as so serious that if necessary measures were not taken, "we may slide back to the situation we had in 1953." He was concerned that things were "not on the up-and-up" in the fulfillment of livestock-rearing obligations. He also wrote about serious flaws in crop farming, especially in the virgin lands.³⁹

An analysis of Khrushchev's agrarian policy during the Seven-Year Plan (from the late 1950s to September 1964) based on an aggregated variety of sources (political, socioeconomic, demographic) shows that this policy was far from homogeneous and consistent, since it reflected the reformer's false starts and his search for answers—highly energetic, although at times chaotic and contradictory. Khrushchev wanted to find a way out of a difficult situation, to prevent any dip in production and living standards, and to lock in the results achieved during the 1950s.

Paradoxically, Khrushchev's first actions were based on the peremptory administrative methods that the September plenum had rejected and on reinforcing the dictatorship of the Party. This became especially clear at the Central Committee plenum in March 1962, which discussed the tasks facing the Party in strengthening oversight of agriculture at the "contemporary stage of building communism." The beginning of that stage had been defined by the new party platform, which, given that the country had entered the "period of the all-out construction of communism," proclaimed the "incrementally growing role of the Communist Party as the leading and guiding force in Soviet society"—even though, by the platform's own definition, the "state of the dictatorship of the proletariat has transformed into a state of the whole people [*obshchenarodnoe gosudarstvo*], into a body that expresses the interests and will of the entire people."

Agricultural production (meaning the collective and state farms), Khrushchev said, was poorly run, which required the Party and the state to "actively

intervene” in work done on the farms to “influence the course of production on a daily basis.” He criticized leaders who assumed that since the collective farm was a cooperative business, its affairs were exempt from intervention. “Where is the logic?” he bristled. “On the one hand, we directly and straightforwardly intervene in many aspects of cooperative life, and on the otherhand . . . we preach positions of nonintervention in cooperative affairs.”⁴⁰ This statement disavowed decrees adopted in 1955 and 1956 to modify agricultural planning by expanding the collective farms’ rights to manage their own internal operations, and so on. In the same vein, the regime restructured agrarian sector management through the creation of territorial agricultural production administrations, then separated regional party organizations into industrial and agricultural branches, which approximately doubled the number of party functionaries in the countryside. Once more people from the Party were keeping an eye on things, and their leading role, as had been expected, could only grow.

Khrushchev also hoped to turn agriculture, especially animal husbandry, around by “eradicating” the aftereffects of the untenable (extensive) grass-rotation system of Academician [Vasilii Robertovich] Vil’iams and replacing it with a tilled-crop system that he saw as more progressive. This change meant halting the sowing of perennial and annual grasses countrywide, and plowing up meadows and sowing them and the full-fallow fields with corn and other crops. This issue was raised at the March 1962 plenum. Khrushchev estimated that plowing and seeding that entire area (some 60 million hectares) with high-yield crops would produce enough grain and fodder to meet, even exceed, the country’s needs.⁴¹ Every high-ranking party member at plenums and conferences began reporting on the fulfillment of this task—even leaders in Kazakhstan and elsewhere, who had no other means of fighting weeds on the newly plowed virgin lands other than to let them lie full fallow, and in the Baltic region, where plowing meadows could have disastrous effects on the livestock.

Evidently, even Khrushchev himself had little faith that his proposed measure would pay off quickly. Soon (less than three months) afterward, he “supplemented” it with the more reliable and fast-acting step of raising retail prices for livestock products while increasing purchase prices by approximately 35 percent (USSR Council of Ministers decree, 31 May 1962). The idea was to stimulate the collective and state farms to increase their production of meat, meat products, and butter. This sensible and justified measure had its greatest impact on the urban public. People reacted swiftly and negatively, as the country’s top leadership learned from KGB bulletins. Unlike Khrushchev, the man in the street quickly figured out the main reason for the retail price hike. He attributed it to “bad governmental decrees”—the result of miscalculations by authorities who had forced people to slaughter

their cattle and give up on raising young stock. "Where will the meat come from," the townsfolk wondered, "if the cattle are destroyed?" "If the workers were to do as they do in the West and go on strike, those price increases would be reversed right away."⁴²

Spontaneous worker demonstrations took place in Novocherkassk and other towns, but Khrushchev, relying on the power of the "people's" state represented by the police force and even troops, quickly put them down. Several dozen workers shed their blood and many "ringleaders and active participants in the mass disturbances" were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. But the media had nothing to say about the "Novocherkassk tragedy." Thirty years passed before society learned of this "strictly classified" state secret.

By raising purchase prices and through other measures, the authorities contrived to improve the situation in livestock rearing somewhat and bring some stability to crop farming. But, as noted above, food grain still had to be imported when the 1963 harvest failed.

The agrarian policy would remain at an impasse, though, unless the regime reinstated the course adopted at the 1953 September plenum. Khrushchev shed rather clear light on this issue through his analysis of letters from collective-farm chairmen, specialists, and rank-and-file collective farmers sent to the Central Committee and the Council of Ministers, excerpts from which he read at a conference of leading officials in party, soviet, and agricultural bodies held in February 1964. Those letters, he said, contained evidence that the local agencies had grossly violated the decrees of 1955–56 in recent times by imposing crop-sowing plans on the collective farms and dictating the structuring of land under cultivation, thus paralyzing the farm leaderships and stifling the collective farmers' initiative. After emphasizing that these were not isolated instances, he warned that a party and government decree was in the works that censured abuses of administrative power and the distortion of adopted resolutions and that other measures, some punitive, would be applied to leaders who did not draw the appropriate conclusions. "Then there will be fewer people keen to lord it over the collective farms and throw their weight around," he threatened.⁴³

Someone might have reminded Nikita Sergeevich of what he had said two years earlier, at the March 1962 Central Committee plenum. Enlightenment, as we see, came slowly.

The last two plenums chaired by Khrushchev set a new course in agrarian policy. The first, in December 1963, concentrated on accelerating the development of the chemical industry as a crucial way of boosting agricultural production and improving the general well-being. The second—a landmark meeting, in its way, held in February 1964—comprehensively reviewed measures to intensify agricultural production (through the use of fertilizers, the

development of irrigation, integrated mechanization, and the incorporation of scientific achievements and best practices). It clearly identified intensification as the general direction for boosting agricultural production, the “high road” in the development of productive forces. It revealed the three basic components of that process (Brezhnev’s “three whales”)—the integrated mechanization, amelioration, and chemicalization of agriculture. It also underscored the significance of consistent specialization in agricultural production, by zone and within individual farms, and the creation of large, highly mechanized farms that specialized in defined types of marketable output and focused on the major cities and industrial centers.⁴⁴

The Party and the state adopted several resolutions to implement the agricultural intensification program and to solve various social problems. These resolutions included a decree from the Central Committee and Council of Ministers dated 3 September 1964 setting up the Poultry Industry Directorate (Ptitseprom), the first all-union agroindustrial consortium. It subsequently proved its worth by making the production of poultry meat and eggs a nonissue for several years.

On 15 July 1964 the USSR Supreme Soviet passed a law on pensions and benefits for collective-farm members that established, for the first time in the history of the Soviet countryside, a state system of social welfare for collective farmers. The law introduced old-age pensions, for men aged sixty-five and up and women of sixty or older—paid from a central fund made up of deductions from collective-farm revenues and annual appropriations from the state budget.⁴⁵

After the 1964 February plenum, the budget allocated to agriculture the “largest capital investments in the entire history of Soviet power”: 5,400,000,000 rubles for production alone, compared to 985,000 rubles in 1953.⁴⁶ Khrushchev had penciled in for November 1964 a special Central Committee plenum to discuss agricultural issues, including the reorganization of sector oversight (abolishing the collective- and state-farm management boards and refining the structure of party leadership).

All those innovations and definitions of a “new course” were, naturally, modeled on the socialist paradigm. They made no provision for alternatives permitting a transition to a mixed economy, the free development of family farms (much less peasant freeholds [*fermerskie khoziaistva*]), and rural entrepreneurship. No one came close to acknowledging a farmer’s right to choose a given form of farming (other than a collective or state farm), including any form underpinned by private property [*chastnaia sobstvennost*]. Fixated on the “socialist system of agriculture” (in its Leninist-Stalinist interpretation), Khrushchev and other socialist reformers of his generation would not have dreamed of such possibilities, even in their worst nightmares. One of the

statements made by Lenin and canonized by Stalin in the *Short Course on the History of the Communist Party* [Kratkii kurs Istorii VKP(b)]—"If we continue as of old on our small farms, even as free citizens on free land, we shall still be faced with inevitable ruin"—sounded a menacing note of caution.⁴⁷

Yet Khrushchev, unlike Stalin, accepted the need to improve economic relations between the state and agricultural producers based on the development of trade and monetary relations, while remaining within the socialist framework. Evidence of his views lies in measures such as the significant increase in procurement prices, the abolition of payment in kind to the machine-tractor stations and of mandatory deliveries from both collective farms and personal subsidiary plots, and the introduction of a purchasing system. In his report to the December 1958 Central Committee plenum, he emphasized that the "economic link between the state and the collective farms through the tax system . . . has not stimulated growth in labor productivity. . . . At this time, when the need for mandatory deliveries is declining, taxes are to be replaced by the buying and selling of products at prices that reflect the level of production and labor productivity." When asked, "will not the unregulated sale of products by collective farmers introduce an element of unmanaged spontaneity into the development of agriculture?" Khrushchev announced that "misgivings such as these are groundless, since our economy is based on state planning. In accordance with the needs of the people, the state will regulate output production, and prices too, in every necessary instance."⁴⁸

This approach brings Khrushchev's concept into the vicinity of the contemporary Chinese model of a market economy but differs radically from Stalin's "special kind of commodity production." In his occasional discourses on the commercial alliance between town and countryside, on the development of the market and even of market relations between the state and the collective farms under socialism, Stalin never, by word or deed, intruded on the system of mandatory deliveries to the state or payments in kind to the machine-tractor stations. Nor did he consider an increase—even to the break-even point—in procurement prices for grain and livestock products or the abolition or reduction of mandatory deliveries to the state from attached allotments.

But the time granted to Khrushchev by history was coming to an end. His popularity was falling fast. Patience had run dry—both among the people, who disliked the significant ("temporary") increase in retail prices for livestock products, the squeeze put on the owners of attached allotments, the first mass purchases of grain from the West, and so on, and among the ruling party elite, which took particular exception to the way in which Khrushchev had trampled underfoot the norms and principles of "collective leadership" in matters of agriculture and to his high-handedness, verging on tyranny. The resolutions adopted in 1963 and 1964 had, in principle, a lasting character. In my view,

Khrushchev, if he wanted to improve his situation, had to pass some resolutions with an immediate impact: first and foremost, government decrees to reduce retail prices for livestock products (some of them, at least), impose ironclad prohibitions on interfering with the personal plots of citizens (collective farmers, state-farm workers, and townfolk), and halt the purchase of foreign grain (which the 1964 harvest made possible, since, by an irony of fate, it was the best in the entire Khrushchev period—152.1 million tons, compared to 134.7 million in the previous banner year of 1958).

The reformer should have rectified his three “fatal” errors. He did not. The denouement was at hand.

Even so, we can identify not two but three periods of Khrushchev’s agrarian reforms, or of a third stage embedded within the second (1963–64), which tied into the elaboration of a new course and its initial implementation. This was, in a way, Khrushchev’s testament or valediction to future Russian reformers.

Attendees at the March 1965 Central Committee plenum—both the keynote speaker (Leonid Brezhnev) and anyone else with something to say—offered overall assessments of the first reformer in post-Stalinist times. To all intents and purposes, they acknowledged Khrushchev’s agrarian reforms to be irreversible and gave the course adopted at the September Central Committee plenum very high marks. They resolved to pursue both, with some supplementation. But the “innovations,” as such, were few and mainly amounted to two: a multiyear procurement plan for agricultural products with surcharges for a 50 percent over target production of barley and rye, and an increase in capital investment in the agrarian sector.

Mikhail Gorbachev offered approximately the same evaluation of the Khrushchev reforms at “his” 1989 March plenum—although he emphasized 1953–58.⁴⁹ But, as previously noted, even after 1958 agricultural production continued to grow on almost every index. Only once, during the poor harvest of 1963, was the level of the banner year of 1958 not attained (with a shortfall of only 1 percent in gross output, although the country exceeded the 1958 level by 21 percent the next year).⁵⁰

In my view, the Khrushchev agrarian reforms primarily represented a rupture of several links in Stalin’s sclerotic administrative-bureaucratic system—the liquidation of extreme manifestations of a totalitarian regime—and the results were impressive. The early 1960s brought malfunctions, slippage, a partial reversion to administrative methods. But in 1963 and 1964, the regime settled on advances based on more far-reaching intensification and modernization in the agrarian sector and took important steps toward the implementation of that course.

We conclude with two little-known but informative facts from the history of Khrushchev’s agrarian reforms. The first comes from December 1959,

when, in a speech to the Central Committee plenum, Khrushchev rejected suggestions from certain foreign “well-wishers” who advised Russia to buy vodka abroad. “Why would we buy vodka elsewhere?” he asked. “We have our own, and there’s enough for you. Be our guests, buy some.” The second occurred during a conversation between Khrushchev and Orville Lothrop Freeman, U.S. minister of agriculture, in July 1963. “Mr. Chairman, I have a problem of my own,” Freeman said earnestly. “I am prepared to sell to you a significant quantity of poultry (broilers). It’s a very good product, and very cheap.” And Khrushchev replied, “We’ll create our own production, and we’ll have plenty of poultry. . . . But machines to produce mineral fertilizers, now those we’ll buy from you.”⁵¹

Not bad advice, this, for the reformers of the new Russia, and it should have been taken to heart over a decade ago!

Notes

1. M.A. Beznin, *Krest’ianskii dvor v rossiiskom Nechernozem’e, 1950–1965* (Vologda, 1991); L.N. Denisova, *Ischezaiushchaia derevnia Rossii: Nechernozem’e v 1960–1980 gody* (Moscow, 1996), O.M. Verbitskaia, *Rossiiskoe krest’ianstvo: ot Stalina k Khrushchevu, seredina 40-kh–nachalo 60-kh godov* (Moscow, 1992).

2. A.A. Nikonov, *Spiral’ mnogovekovoï dramy: agrarnaia nauka i politika Rossii (XVIII–XX vv.)* (Moscow, 1995), chaps. 8, 9; *Voprosy istorii*, 1998, nos. 3–12.

3. See V.P. Motrevich, *Sel’skoe khoziaistvo Urala v pokazateliakh statistiki (1941–1950 gg.)* (Ekaterinburg, 1993); I.E. Zelenin, “O nekotorykh pokazateliakh sovetskoi sel’skokhoziaistvennoi statistiki (30–60-e gody),” in *Aktual’nye problemy arkheografii, istochnikovedeniia i istoriografii. Materialy Vserossiiskoi nauchnoi konferentsii* (Vologda, 1995); and Iu.P. Denisov, “Agrarnaia politika N. Khrushcheva: itogi i uroki,” *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennost’*, 1996, no. 1.

4. Center for the Preservation of Contemporary Documentation (TsKhSD), f. 2, op. 1, d. 61, l. 35.

5. *Ibid.*, l. 57.

6. *Ibid.*, d. 89, ll. 92–94.

7. *Ibid.*, ll. 24, 27, 55, 92.

8. *Ibid.*, d. 138, ll. 107–11.

9. V.I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 38, p. 28; N.S. Khrushchev, *Stroitel’stvo kommunizma v SSSR i razvitie sel’skogo khoziaistva* (Moscow, 1963), vol. 4, p. 177; vol. 8, pp. 74–75.

10. See *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, 1989, no. 3, p. 161.

11. V.P. Popov, *Rossiiskaia derevnia posle voiny (iiun’ 1945–mart 1953). Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow, 1993), doc. no. 49.

12. *KPSS v rezoliutsiakh i resheniakh s’ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK*, 8th ed. (Moscow, 1962), vol. 7, pp. 274–77.

13. N.S. Khrushchev, *Stroitel’stvo kommunizma v SSSR* [Moscow, 1962], vol. 3, p. 391; *KPSS v rezoliutsiakh*, pp. 361–62.

14. Khrushchev, *Stroitel’stvo kommunizma v SSSR*, vol. 3, pp. 406, 497.

15. *Ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 24–26.

16. TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 45, d. 232, l. 69; *Vedomosti Verkhovnogo Soveta RSFSR*, 1959, no. 30 (these resolutions are also dated to August 1958 but without citation, in *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, 1993, no. 1, p. 110); D.A. Volkogonov, *Sem' vozhdiei* (Moscow, 1996), bk. 1, p. 386; and R.G. Pikhov, *Sovetskii Soiuz: istoriia vlasti 1945–1991* (Moscow, 1998), pp. 194, 196. This is clearly an error, since no state-level resolutions could have been adopted on this issue before Khrushchev raised it at the Central Committee plenum in June 1959. The issue here is not, of course, the formal pinpointing of a date but the identification of when the state first mustered the legal and tangible means to launch its all-out attack on Soviet citizens' personal subsidiary plots [LPKh].

17. TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 45, d. 232, ll. 2, 24, 63.

18. *Ibid.*, l. 69.

19. *Ibid.*, d. 310, ll. 69–71.

20. See *Sel'skoe khoziaistvo SSSR. Statisticheskii sbornik* (Moscow, 1960), pp. 238, 242, 266–69, 334–37; and *Sel'skoe khoziaistvo SSSR. Statisticheskii sbornik* (Moscow, 1971), pp. 246–49, 289, 299, 307, 314.

21. See V.B. Ostrovskii, *Kolkhoznoe krest'ianstvo SSSR* (Saratov, 1967), p. 93; and Verbitskaia, *Rossiiskoe krest'ianstvo*, pp. 76–79.

22. Khrushchev, *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma v SSSR*, vol. 1, pp. 10, 42–43.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 85–100; TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 45, d. 1, ll. 1–14.

24. Khrushchev, *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma v SSSR*, vol. 1, pp. 331, 334.

25. For further detail, see I.E. Zelenin, "Tselinnaia epopeia: razrabotka, priniatie i osushchestvlenie pervoi khrushchevskoi 'sverkhprogrammy' (sentiabr' 1953–nachalo 60-kh godov)," *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, 1998, no. 4.

26. *Sel'skoe khoziaistvo SSSR* (1960), p. 196; *Plenum TsK KPSS 15–19 dekabria 1958 g. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1958), p. 14; *KPSS v rezoliutsiakh*, vol. 7, p. 350.

27. *Sel'skoe khoziaistvo SSSR* (1971), p. 152 (author's calculations).

28. *Plenum TsK KPSS 9–13 dekabria 1963 g. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1964), p. 7; *Sel'skoe khoziaistvo SSSR* (1971), pp. 35, 152. Without citing their sources or providing any concrete data, the authors of several works, including some published recently, assert that the mass purchases of grain abroad under Khrushchev began in 1962 (see *Noveishaia istoriia Otechestva XX vek. Uchebnik dlia vuzov* [Moscow, 1998], vol. 2, p. 308; and Pikhov, *Sovetskii Soiuz*, p. 198).

29. Volkogonov, *Sem' vozhdiei*, p. 384.

30. Pikhov, *Sovetskii Soiuz*, p. 370.

31. *Plenum TsK KPSS 9–13 dekabria 1963 g.*, p. 9.

32. *Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR v 1963 godu* (Moscow, 1964), pp. 549, 550.

33. The Soviet version of serfdom in the countryside was not abolished until after 28 August 1974, the date of a joint Central Committee and USSR Council of Ministers decree on "Measures to Further Improve the Passport System in the USSR" [O merakh po dal'neishemu sovershenstvovaniiu pasportnoi sistemy v SSSR] (*Sobranie postanovlenii pravitel'stva SSSR*, 1974, no. 19, col. 109). See also V.P. Popov, "Pasportnaia sistema v SSSR (1932–1976)," *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, 1995, no. 8.

34. *Naselenie SSSR 1987. Statisticheskii sbornik* (Moscow, 1988), p. 8; *Otechestvennye arkhivy*, 1994, no. 1, p. 35.

35. See *Plenum TsK KPSS 24–26 marta 1965 g. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1965), p. 162.

36. See *Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR v 1958 godu. Statisticheskii ezhegodnik* (Moscow, 1959), pp. 796–97.

37. See *SSSR i kholodnaia voina* (Moscow, 1995), chaps. 2, 6.
38. See *Plenum TsK KPSS 22–25 dekabria 1959 g. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1960).
39. Khrushchev, *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma v SSSR*, vol. 4, pp. 162–86.
40. *Plenum TsK KPSS 5–9 marta 1962 g. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1962), p. 21, 64–65; *KPSS v rezoliutsiakh*, vol. 8, pp. 340–41.
41. *Plenum TsK KPSS 5–9 marta 1962 g.*, pp. 36, 41–59.
42. TsKhSD, f. 89, perechen' 6, dok. 6, dok. 14; *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, 1993, no. 1, pp. 114–18.
43. Khrushchev, *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma v SSSR*, vol. 8, pp. 523–28.
44. *KPSS v rezoliutsiakh*, vol. 8, pp. 473–78.
45. *Resheniia partii i pravitel'stva po khoziaistvennym voprosam (1917–1967 gg.)* (Moscow, 1968), vol. 5, pp. 472–78.
46. Khrushchev, *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma v SSSR*, vol. 8, pp. 465–66.
47. *Istoriia VKP(b). Kratkii kurs* (Moscow, 1938), p. 274. [Quoted from www.marx2mao.com/Other/HCPSU39iii.html.—Trans.]
48. *Plenum TsK KPSS 15–19 dekabria 1958 g.*, pp. 77–78.
49. *Materialy plenuma TsK KPSS 15–16 marta 1989 goda* (Moscow, 1989), p. 44.
50. *Sel'skoe khoziaistvo SSSR* (1971), pp. 35, 48, 152, 245, 287.
51. Khrushchev, *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma v SSSR*, vol. 4, pp. 121–22; vol. 8, pp. 48, 49, 57.

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