The Ordeal of the Russian Peasantry

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THE ORDEAL OF THE RUSSIAN PEASANTRY

By William Henry Chamberlin

Four years have passed since the rulers of the Soviet Union decided to make an end of individual farming. These four years represent a period of what may be called agrarian revolution from the top, because no one with any realistic knowledge of the Russian village can believe that the majority of the peasants, left to their own volition, would have decided to sink their small holdings in the new kolkhozi, or collective farms. The best evidence on this question is the fact that only about two percent of the peasant households entered collective farms during the years of the New Economic Policy, up to 1929, when the choice was entirely free and before the overwhelming administrative and economic power of the highly centralized and dictatorial Soviet state had not been thrown on the side of the new organization of agriculture.

During these four years the Russian peasants have lived through a tremendous ordeal, second in degree of violent change and suffering only to the crowded years of social upheaval, civil war and famine which marked the period from 1917 until 1921. The very face of the countryside has been transformed. The traditional strips of land which signalized individual holdings have given way to the wide, compact fields of collective and state farms. The hum of the tractor is heard far more frequently. There are changes which are less favorable: if there are more tractors on the Soviet fields there are far fewer horses and cows, pigs and sheep; and the new harvesting combines which are supposed to symbolize the march of progress in agriculture sometimes find the going hard in the seas of weeds to be found on far too many state and collective farms.

In the human sphere the changes that one finds in the Russian country districts today are even more revolutionary. In a very literal sense, the first have often become last and the last have become first. The former batrak, or farmhand, who used to be at the bottom of the village social hierarchy, may today be the manager of a collective farm, directing the work of hundreds of his fellow villagers. There has been a considerable influx of urban communists, some of them ex-workers, into the villages as
directors of state and collective farms or heads of the important political departments which were installed during the last year. There has been a gigantic "liquidation" of the more well-to-do and incorrigibly individualistic peasants, loosely and conveniently dubbed kulaks. They have been transported by hundreds of thousands, if not by millions, to forced labor in timber camps and on new construction enterprises and canals. And during the last winter and spring stark hunger, accompanied by a mortality rate that was three or four times the normal figure, stalked through the villages of wide areas of southern and southeastern Russia. This low point in the Soviet agrarian situation has been followed by an appreciable recovery, in connection with this year's good harvest; but much reconstruction remains to be done before Russian agricultural production can be regarded as normal and satisfactory.

The word experiment has been overworked in connection with the Soviet Union; but it is still applicable to the great upheaval in agricultural relations which set in during 1929. As it has directly affected the lives of more people than any other single Soviet policy, and as it has inaugurated completely novel methods of rural economy, the aims and the results of this experiment up to date seem worthy of careful study, especially as a certain degree of stabilization has now been reached in the organization of the Russian countryside.

The objective of Soviet agrarian policy may be summed up in the phrase: collectivization plus mechanization. Under the new scheme, the collective farm, where hundreds or in exceptional cases thousands of peasant holdings would be thrown together, was to become the basic unit in agriculture. Side by side with the collective farms, of which there are now more than 230,000, were created a considerable number of new state farms. There are between 5,000 and 6,000 state farms at the present time. They differ from the collective farms in that they are established on unused or confiscated land and equipped by the state, whereas the collective farms pool the resources of their members. The state farm is operated on the same principle as a state factory, with a manager appointed by the organization which has charge of the farm and hired labor paid at fixed rates. On the collective

1 The present organization of Soviet agriculture did not spring ready-made from the minds of the rulers in the Kremlin; important adjustments and modifications have been made from time to time; and some very significant innovations have been introduced during the last year. But the general trend of policy has been unbroken.
farm, on the other hand, no wages are paid. The earnings of the members, which are partly in money, partly in kind, depend on the outcome of each year's crops.

The cement that was to hold the collective farms together, and to increase their productivity, was to be supplied by tractors, harvesting combines, threshing-machines, and other large-scale agricultural implements. Three huge tractor plants (of which two are in full operation) were constructed during the Five Year Plan; the largest agricultural machinery works in Europe was erected at Rostov; and there has been an enlargement of old factories and a building of new ones for the manufacture of combines. It is noteworthy and significant for the new spirit of Soviet agriculture that tractors and similar large machines are not given or sold to the collective farms in direct ownership. They are concentrated in so-called machine-tractor stations, which may be considered the nerve-centers of Soviet agriculture. There are between 2,500 and 3,000 machine-tractor stations all over the Soviet Union; and they send out their machines to all collective farms within a convenient radius, exacting, in return for their services, a fee in kind that may run as high as twenty percent of the crop. There are now about 200,000 tractors working on Soviet fields.

The massing of equipment in the state-operated machine tractor-stations serves a double purpose, technical and political. Provided that the machine-tractor station is efficiently managed and keeps its machines in reasonable repair, this institution insures a more continuous use and a more even spread of mechanized power than would be possible if every collective farm had its own share, large or small, of machinery. Politically this system deprives the collective farmers of any direct ownership of their means of production. It is just one of a number of very powerful weapons which the state can use to bring a recalcitrant collective farm to submission in such matters as state grain deliveries.

Now the Soviet system of agricultural reconstruction has come up against two sets of obstacles, of somewhat different psychological origin. In the first place, it went sharply against the grain of long established habit for the peasant to give up the small individual holding, poor as might be the living which it afforded, and to take his place in the ranks of a large organization, the head of which might be a man whom he did not know and whose agricultural capacity might be open to doubt. The lack of a
trained managerial class for the new large and medium-sized farms which were created so suddenly has been a big handicap, from the standpoint of productive efficiency; and managers of collective farms have not infrequently been selected for political zeal rather than for expert knowledge of agriculture. The wrench at parting with his own land, his own horse and his own working equipment was, of course, apt to be greater in proportion to the peasant’s amount of material well-being. The poorest peasants naturally accepted the new order more acquiescently, if not more enthusiastically, than the well-to-do.

Secondly, the peasant, by virtue of the logic of development under the Five Year Plan, was compelled to fulfill his historic rôle as a heavily laden beast of burden for the state. It is a matter of historical record that Peter the Great, pursuing ambitious schemes of modernization and national aggrandizement, squeezed more out of the peasants than the sleepy Romanov Tsars who preceded him. And one cannot begin to count the cost of Magnitogorsk, Dnieprostroi and the other steel mills, electrical power plants, chemical factories and machine works of the Five Year Plan unless one travels in the villages and acquires first-hand knowledge of the additional levies which have been imposed on the peasants during recent years.

At a time when he was in sharp opposition to the party leadership, embodied in Joseph Stalin, the well-known communist theoretician, Nikolai Bukharin, let slip the phrase: “Military feudal exploitation of the peasantry.” Now he has repented and recanted it. And there is, of course, no official sanction for the view of Trotsky’s former lieutenant, Eugène Preobrazhensky, that the peasantry in the Soviet Union represent a colony, from which fresh capital for industrial development must be extracted. But peasants who never heard of Bukharin and Preobrazhensky are keenly aware of the fact that their yoke has become steadily harder, at least up to the present year, in connection with the country’s sweeping program of industrial construction; and this fact has had a disastrous effect on their morale and on their will to work. It was a distinguishing feature of the New Economic Policy that the peasant had entire freedom in disposing of his surplus produce. A tax in kind was imposed in 1921 and 1922, after which the peasant was liable to an income tax, payable in money. The necessity for meeting this tax and the desire to buy town products were the motives
that induced the peasant to sell his grain and other foodstuffs.

The first breach in this system, the first violation of the peasant's right to dispose of his crop as he saw fit, occurred in 1928, when the government, finding that grain was coming on the market slowly, employed threats of arrest and exile to compel the peasants to sell their grain at the fixed price. This system was greatly extended in succeeding years, and was applied to meat, milk, flax, cotton and most other staple agricultural products. Probably no words were so hated among the peasants in recent years as *khlebozagotovki* (grain collections) and *kontraktatia* (contracting). The autumn period of grain collection was annually heralded by the publication of stern instructions to the rural Soviet authorities to buy up the maximum amount of grain from the peasants, on pain of being considered "right opportunists" and "kulak sympathizers," two very formidable terms of abuse in the Soviet Union. The method of carrying out these "purchases," which were much more suggestive of requisitions, was to set up a quota for deliveries of grain and other products which had to be filled out by every district, every collective farm, every individual peasant household. Failure to comply with the quota was often punished with fines, arrests and deportations. The agricultural produce was paid for at fixed prices, which became steadily smaller in relation to the soaring free market prices. While theoretically peasants who fulfilled their quotas were inclined to buy manufactured goods at correspondingly low prices, the supply of manufactured goods, as a general rule, never sufficed for more than a small fraction of the peasant demand.

This was one major objection of the peasants to this so-called "contracting" system (rather naïvely described by an enthusiastic visitor to the Soviet Union as a beneficent institution, from the peasants' standpoint, since it assured them a ready market and a fair price for their products). The other, even more serious, objection was that the demands of the state were apt to be given precedence over the food needs of the peasants. The peasants had no effective voice in determining the quotas which they were required to deliver up. And the state had several compelling reasons for extracting from the villages the maximum amount of foodstuffs. There was the growing army of workers and employees in the big new industrial plants and construction enter-
prises to be fed. There was the chronic need for foreign currency with which to pay for imported foreign equipment and machinery, a need which could be partially met by forcing the exportation of food products. After the autumn of 1931 a new element entered into the situation: the desire to create large reserves of staple provisions for the military forces which were concentrated in the Far East.

In view of these conditions it was quite natural that the peasants’ needs should be given secondary consideration. And it was equally natural that the peasants, much less touched than the city population by communist agitation and quite indisposed to make voluntary sacrifices on the altar of Soviet industrialization, should have resented a system under which much was taken from them and little was given to them. This feeling of resentment unquestionably played a large rôle in the poor functioning of the collective farms during the first years of their existence.

My travels in the country districts have not given me the impression that superstitious aversion to new ideas in general and to machinery in particular was in any sense an important factor in the passive resistance which certainly characterized the attitude of many of the peasants toward collective farming. A tractor or a harvesting combine might excite some such feeling in the forests of the north or in a Caucasian aul, or mountain village; but in the fertile grain belt of southern and southeastern Russia, whither most of the tractors were dispatched, the overwhelming majority of the peasants were sufficiently advanced to welcome labor-saving machinery. What they disliked about the new agricultural order was not the new power-driven machines, but the fact that neither these machines nor the crops which were produced belonged to them, and that the state claimed and exercised the right of making arbitrary and undetermined levies in kind on their produce.

I have been able to obtain some idea of the phases through which collective farming has passed in the course of three trips to agricultural regions of the Soviet Union. The first of these trips took me to the Lower Volga in the late summer of 1930; the second was to the Crimea and to the Odessa region of Ukraina a year later; the third was to the Kropotkin region of the North Caucasus and to the Kiev and Poltava regions of Ukraina in the latter part of September 1933.
The first trip was immediately after the vast upheaval which had followed the drive to introduce collectivization on a mass scale. The harvest of 1930 was excellent; and Soviet publicists somewhat incautiously and prematurely endeavored to interpret this bounty of nature as primarily attributable to the new system. On the other hand, one found everywhere a formidable diminution in the number of cows, sheep and pigs; the more well-to-do peasants had slaughtered their animals wholesale rather than give them up to the collective farms. There was at this time no acute distress, if one makes allowance for the traditionally low standard of living of the Russian peasants, except among the luckless kulaki, the four or five percent of the peasants who had been driven from their homes and expropriated as exploiters. Some of the kulaki had been shipped off to remote places of exile and hard labor in the forbidding north; others were living in great misery in dugouts and improvised huts outside the village limits, where they had been assigned stretches of poor land and told, more or less, to sink or swim. This was Shrecklichkeit on a large scale, for the total number of families which were liable to uprooting as kulaki all over Russia can scarcely have been much short of a million. Not all of them suffered the more extreme penalty of exile, because some fled in time and concealed themselves in the towns or in parts of the country where they were not known. At the same time this "liquidation" of the kulaki "as a class" was an important and probably an indispensable measure in breaking down the resistance of the peasants to the new system. The kulak, often better educated than his average neighbor and wielding influence simply because he was a successful farmer, was the natural leader of individualist resistance to the new system. With him disposed of in such summary fashion, the task of regimenting the other peasants became much simpler.

For the mass of the peasants the problem of goods exchange between city and village had become acute, and I recall a stormy general meeting of the members of one collective farm, where a representative of the regional Communist Party organization expounded a scheme under which the peasants were to be allowed to buy thirty-five kopecks worth of manufactured goods for every ruble's worth of grain which they sold to the state. The sentiment of the gathering was pretty faithfully voiced by the local blacksmith, who bellowed out: "Thirty-five kopecks on the ruble isn't enough. Couldn't they at least give us all one shirt?"
Although there was some extension of the planted area in 1931 nature turned unfavorable and the total harvest was lower than in the preceding year. There was a further grave decline in 1932; the food situation in the following winter and spring was strained in the towns and catastrophic in some country districts. On January 8, 1934, Izvestia published the following official statistics of harvest yields of the main grain crops for the past four years: 1930, 83,540,000 tons; 1931, 69,480,000; 1932, 69,870,000; 1933, 89,800,000. In 1913 the yield was 80,100,000 tons. The figures for 1932 and 1933 are considerably better than foreign unofficial estimates. Nevertheless, it is significant that in the two lean years, 1931 and 1932, the official estimate of the grain yield is lower by over ten million tons than the figure for 1913, when the population was much smaller. It is also interesting to note that both the yield per acre and the total yield in 1931 and 1932 were lower than was the case in any year between 1925 and 1929, when individual farming was the prevalent form of agriculture.

Weather alone could not be blamed for the poor harvest of 1932. Not only were climatic conditions unfavorable in two main grain-producing regions, Ukraina and the North Caucasus; but in many cases the peasants, discouraged by years of arbitrary requisitioning of their surplus, simply failed to work with normal efficiency. The results are reflected in the report of a correspondent of the Communist Party organ, Pravda, after returning from a tour of investigation in the North Caucasus: "The fields of the Kropotkin region are bearing a thick forest of man-size weeds. . . . In the upper Don corn, sunflower seeds and millet perished from late sowing. . . . The overgrowth of weeds creates extraordinary difficulties with the harvesting. Sheaves sometimes contain more weeds than grain. It is also difficult to stack the weedy grain."

During the first half of the present year the resident of Moscow was perplexed by two apparently contradictory sets of reports about conditions in the southern and southeastern provinces of Russia. Unofficial rumors of hunger on a scale unknown since 1921 and 1922, the years of the greatest famine in Russia’s history, were offset by official claims of a successful spring planting and a favorable crop. In the course of visits to three widely separated regions of Ukraina and the North Caucasus I became convinced that both reports contained a considerable element of truth. Last winter and spring hunger wrote some of the darkest pages in the sombre history of the Russian peasantry. At the
THE ORDEAL OF THE RUSSIAN PEASANTRY 503

time of my trip, in the autumn, there had been a substantial seasonal improvement in food supply; the harvest yield was comfortably above the average, especially in Ukraina; and it did not seem probable that the widespread grim suffering of the early part of the year would be repeated.

Perhaps the Kuban Valley in the North Caucasus, in pre-war days a notably rich and prosperous farming region, offers the most vivid evidence of the havoc which class war has played with Russian agricultural production during the last years. The central point of my trip here was the Cossack village of Kazanskaya, which is some ten miles from the railroad station Kropotkin and is picturesquely located on a high bluff overlooking the Kuban River. I had visited the Kuban region many years ago; and my first reaction of surprise was excited by the complete absence of the fierce and vociferous dogs, of which every Cossack household had formerly possessed, as a rule, at least two or three. The dogs, as I was told by all the peasants whom I questioned, had been eaten or had perished during the hunger. The second unfavorable impression was the amazing growth of weeds, huge, tough and luxuriant, along the roads, in many of the gardens, and in some of the fields. Add to this the fact that almost everyone, from presidents of collective farms to boys and old women on the roads, was feverish as a result of a sweeping epidemic of malaria, and that every native of Kazanskaya and the surrounding villages had vivid tales of last winter’s hunger, sometimes accompanied by stories of friends or relatives who had died either from the swelling which is the main sign of hunger or from the weakness and diseases which are associated with malnutrition, and one may well come to the conclusion that the triumph of collective farming in this part of the Soviet Union seemed to possess a good many elements of a pyrrhic victory.

Even here, however, where the resistance of the population and the ruthless suppression of that resistance by the authorities had been intensified by the fact that a considerable part of the population consisted of Cossacks, the backbone of the White armies during the civil war, there was the negative consolation that the outlook was not so bad as it had been a year ago. The harvest, although not satisfactory, was better than in the previous year, and there was more certainty as to how much of it would remain at the disposal of the peasants. The head of the Kazanskaya Soviet, Mr. Nemov, estimated that about 850 of the vil-
lage's population of 8,000 had perished during the last year. He furnished detailed figures for the first four months of the year, showing a steep rise in the mortality curve, accompanying the diminution of food reserves toward spring. According to his figures, 21 people died in January, 34 in February, 79 in March and 155 in April. Deaths from "exhaustion," of which there was one in January, increased to 98 in April.

One found much the same picture in wandering through villages around Poltava, site of Peter the Great's decisive victory over King Charles XII of Sweden, and Belaya Tserkov, a town in the former Jewish Pale of Settlement, southwest of Kiev. The Kazanskaya figure of approximately ten percent mortality was frequently found, although one found villages which had apparently fared better and one, named Cherkass, which had fared much worse, according to the figures of its Soviet. Except for one commune near Poltava, which had developed under relatively favorable auspices, I did not find a single place which did not report some casualties. The measure of the hunger from which the Soviet Union suffered during the past winter and spring may be gauged from the fact that the population of Ukraina is approximately 35,000,000, that of the North Caucasus about 10,000,000, and that of other regions which, according to general reports, did not escape the scourge of failure of food supply, such as the Middle and Lower Volga and Kazakstan, about 15,000,000.

The hunger was a direct result of the crisis, already mentioned, of collectivized agriculture in 1932. Although there had apparently been no violent resistance on a mass scale, many of the peasants unquestionably went on a passive strike and simply let a good deal of the crop go to waste on the fields. The government was unwilling to abate its grain demands in the face of what it regarded as deliberate sabotage. Consequently, although some state relief was furnished in the spring, especially to collective farms, there simply was not enough food to go around, and a heavy death toll followed. As might have been expected, the mortality was far greater in the villages than in the towns, where a regular if sometimes straitened bread ration was assured to workers and employees, and it was much heavier among edinolicheniki (individual peasants) than among members of collective farms. For some less clearly explicable reason men apparently succumbed more readily than women.
That a generally good crop was harvested this year may seem amazing, in the light of what happened last winter and spring. One must remember, however, that there is a tenacious vitality in the semi-Asiatic Russian peasantry and that recovery comes more easily than might be the case in a softer country. Moreover, the very extremity to which the peasants were reduced was a very powerful incentive in driving them to work hard and to discard all thought of shirking. Other factors in the relative improvement which this year has witnessed in the Soviet agricultural situation may be listed.

In the first place, the weather, which plays a bigger part in harvest yields than communist planners like to admit, was more favorable. Secondly, a very important change in the method of assessing the levies in kind on the peasants, adopted by the government last winter, yielded beneficial results. Up to 1933 there was no recognized limit to the amount of grain which an energetic local official might squeeze out of the peasants in his district. Now the peasant's obligation is clearly set down in the form of an acreage tax, which varies in different parts of the country according to the fertility of the soil (it amounts to about five bushels an acre in the rich black-earth regions of the south and southeast). Inasmuch as this tax cannot be either diminished or increased, it places a premium on efficient farming, since the peasant who raises more grain will retain more for his own use and for free sale on the market. Still another factor making for improvement is the institution throughout the countryside of so-called political departments, manned by picked communists and entrusted with the function of supervising propaganda and developing leadership in the collective farms. The political departments are attached to machine-tractor stations and to the larger state farms. They give the central authorities a firmer grip on the rural areas and push ahead the necessarily slow process of creating in the collectivized peasant something of the psychology of the urban worker.

When the Soviet régime embarked on its policy of placing all agriculture on a state and collectivist basis it launched out on quite uncharted waters. No such organization of agriculture had been known since man began to plant. Friends and enemies alike were extravagant in their prophecies of triumph or disaster. Looking back over a perspective of four years, one clearly sees the mistaken character of many of these prophecies. There is
perhaps no more striking illustration of the tremendously firm
grip of the Soviet Government on the Russian population than
its demonstrated ability to carry out a change which was cer-
tainly unwelcome to a great many peasants, which was accom-
panied by the dispossession of large numbers of well-to-do
peasant households, which led during the last winter and spring
to hunger on a scale unknown since 1921–1922, without exciting
any serious mass resistance. The system now is irrevocably
clamped down, barring some quite unpredictable general up-
heaval in Russian life; and dictatorships of any kind are not in
the habit of reckoning very much with the amount of human
suffering which the execution of their policies may imply.

So the predictions of complete collapse and forced reversion to
individualist farming have been refuted by the course of events.
There has been an equally signal refutation of the idea that, as a
result of collectivization, Russian agriculture would leap forward
to unprecedented productivity. It is significant in this connection
that the official summary of the results of the fulfillment of the
first Five Year Plan is silent about such important indices of
agricultural prosperity as the size of grain crops and the number
of livestock in the country. Presumably the discrepancies be-
tween plan and achievement (the Five Year Plan forecast a
steady increase in the number of livestock and a grain crop of
about a hundred million tons in its last year, 1932–1933) were too
glaring to be deemed suitable for publication.

While no official figures for livestock in the entire Soviet Union
have been published within recent years, I was able to obtain
from the Ukrainian Commissariat for Agriculture comparative
statistics as revealed by a livestock count of 1929 and by a
census, covering 86 percent of the rural Soviets, carried out in the
summer of 1933. According to these figures, the number of horses
decreased from 5,543,000 to 2,772,000; the number of horned
cattle from 7,611,000 to 3,832,000; the number of cows from
3,873,000 to 2,049,000; the number of pigs from 3,472,000
to 1,390,000; the number of sheep from 6,652,000 to 1,543,300.
There is no reason to suppose that Ukraine fared worse, as re-
gards the destruction of its livestock, than other former main
cattle regions, such as the North Caucasus and Kazakstan,

2 The 1929 figures for horned cattle and cows were obtained not from the Ukrainian Commissariat for Agriculture, but from a publication of the Soviet central statistical bureau entitled “The USSR for Fifteen Years.”
where governmental policy was equally ruthless and deliberate destruction or neglect of livestock by the desperate peasants was probably equally great. It is obvious, therefore, that in such an important branch of agriculture as animal husbandry there has been disastrous retrogression during the last four years which can be fully made good, in all probability, only after the passing of a longer period.

The idea, often propounded by people with very scant practical knowledge of agriculture, that tractors and large farm units, apart from other conditions, would mean increased productivity, has proved a fallacy. The general food rationing in the towns, the acute food shortage in the villages, which reached its formidable climax last spring, the relatively small exportation of foodstuffs from Russia — all these things offer convincing proof that the problem of increasing the output of foodstuffs has not been satisfactorily solved as yet.

What does the future hold for the Russian peasantry, after the stern ordeal of the last four years? Favorable elements in the situation are the increased supply of tractors which is insured by the steadier and larger output of the big factories at Stalingrad and Kharkov, and the weaning away from old individualist habits that may conceivably come with the passing of time. On the other hand, any attempt to depart from the definite limits of the food levy which have been laid down during the present year, any injudicious effort to socialize the remaining personal property of the peasants, might provoke a new crisis. During the last few years the peasant has been carrying a large share of the heavy load of the Five Year Plan on his shoulders. He has been definitely the “forgotten man” of a social order on fire with schemes of industrial expansion and military preparedness. The future will show whether the young generation now growing up under the new collectivized order will attain a standard of living that may seem, in retrospect, to compensate in some measure for what their parents have lived through.