

Russia's Farm Crisis

ISAAC DEUTSCHER

FOR SEVERAL MONTHS the Soviet press and the Soviet propaganda agencies have been preparing the public for an important session of the party's Central Committee, which was originally scheduled for the middle of December. The main point on the agenda, the only one to be published, was the situation in farming. In accordance with the well-established ritual, the newspapers daily displayed the farmers' greetings to the Central Committee and their pledges to raise and improve output. Then, it was suddenly announced that the session had been postponed till January, 1961. No explanation was given, but none was needed to make Soviet people aware of a struggle over agricultural policy that was going on in the ruling group, and of the important consequences this was likely to have.

Soviet farming has now had two lean years after four or five fat ones. There were exceptionally bad climatic conditions and poor crops in 1959 and again in 1960. Although nature may be a "nonpolitical factor," a depression in farming, especially in Soviet farming, usually has political repercussions, because it lays bare the weaknesses of the technical and economic organization of agriculture and of the government's policy. The two bad harvests have been two blows to Khrushchev's policy and prestige, blows that are all the more telling because much of his prestige rested on the presumed success of his reforms in farming and the resulting improvement in Soviet standards of living. Already at the December, 1959, session of the Central Committee these reforms came under attack; and they are under even heavier fire just now.

KHRUSHCHEV'S successes have up to a point been quite real but, as it turns out, not quite stable. By means of a whole series of concessions to the farmers, by freeing them from rigid government control, raising prices for agricultural produce, and selling the stocks of the machine tractor stations to the kolkhozes,

Khrushchev had given the farmers incentives that had been denied to them ever since the beginning of collectivization.

Consequently, between 1953 and 1958 grain output went up steadily from 85 million tons (the average for the last five years of the Stalin era) to the bumper crop of 141 million tons in 1958. In the same years government purchases of grain, mostly wheat, on which the provisioning of the towns depends, went up from 32 to 57 million tons, those of milk and dairy produce from 12 to 25 million tons, and those of meat from 5 to 7.5 million tons. These increases enabled the government not only to improve considerably the Soviet town dweller's diet but also to export foodstuffs to Poland and Hungary and to countries outside the Soviet bloc.

Khrushchev's price policy was reflected in rural incomes derived from food sales. These rose from about 35 billion rubles in the early 1950's to 135 billion in 1958. The peasantry had all the more reason to be contented because this net gain of 100 billion rubles was accompanied by a drop of about twenty per cent in the prices of those industrial goods the farmers purchased from town.

'Within a Few Years'

It is not known exactly just how bad the 1960 harvest was. The fact that the government has not yet published the relevant figures indicates that it has been bad enough. According to optimistic estimates that may be deduced from some official statements, the grain harvest declined from the high mark of 141 million tons to around 110 million tons. A pessimistic but probably too extreme estimate puts the figure much lower. Even in the light of the optimistic estimate, the agricultural surplus that made possible recent improvements in Soviet living standards has shrunk greatly for the time being.

This need not lead to a substantial deterioration in the nation's diet. It must be assumed that during the

fat years the government has laid in stocks on which it can now draw. But what it does mean is that the popular expectation of a further rapid continuous and even startling improvement in living conditions is bound to be frustrated. Gone are the days when the Soviet premier repeated on every occasion the boisterous prediction that "within a few years" the Soviet citizen would catch up with the American in meat consumption. The propagandists do their best to make people forget that that unfortunate prediction was ever uttered.

The effect of the setback to Soviet farming is more immediately felt outside the Soviet Union, in the other Communist-ruled countries. It so happens that China and Eastern Europe have also had bad harvests these last two years and have looked to Moscow for help. As early as last summer, Moscow issued a grave warning to its allies that it would not have large surpluses in 1960 and that they must fend for themselves. The question was certainly raised again during the recent conference of Communist leaders in Moscow, and the response could not have been reassuring to Khrushchev's clients. This probably accounts for the speeding up of collectivization in Hungary, announced by Kadar on his return from Moscow. It is true that increased pressure for collectivization may cause Hungarian peasants to produce less than they have produced hitherto; but the collectivist organization may nevertheless enable the Kadar government to extract more from them and so secure in some measure the provisioning of the towns. The situation is more critical in Poland, where resistance to collectivization is powerful not only among the peasantry but in Gomulka's own party and entourage, and where food shortages appear to have been worse than elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

Experiment in the Virgin Lands

Khrushchev has staked a great deal on the plowing up, in 1954-1957, of the eighty million acres of virgin land, most of it in the steppe of Kazakhstan. He has set up there about 1,200 new giant sovkhozes, or state-owned farms, the produce of which was to make his food policy

partly independent of the unstable productivity and unstable moods of the kolkhoz peasantry. In the first few years the harvests of the virgin lands were indeed abundant; and in the flush of success Khrushchev often regaled his audiences with the story of how his rivals, especially Malenkov, had opposed him in this bold experiment and had predicted its failure. Apart from his rivals, some of his own agricultural experts had also feared that the steppe might, after yielding a few rich crops, turn into a dust bowl. Many people, from the Central Committee down to the tillers of virgin lands, are now wondering whether these warnings were not justified after all.

Criticisms are also expressed, even in the Soviet press, about the consequences of Khrushchev's other great move, the sale of the machine tractor stations to the collective farms. The critics claim that as a result of this and also of the decentralization of industrial control, agricultural machinery is not renovated in time, not kept in good repair, and is being less efficiently used. These criticisms may be pointless: one or two good harvests may redress the balance; and, anyhow, the machine tractor stations cannot be reconstituted, nor can the new virgin-land farms be abandoned. But what is questioned is the soundness of Khrushchev's judgment.

New tensions are also making themselves felt in the Soviet countryside. Khrushchev's great popularity there was largely based on the gain of 100 billion rubles the peasantry had pocketed in 1958. (The net gain per family was more than 5,000 rubles in cash, a considerable sum for peasants earning most of their upkeep in kind.) The expectation of a further rapid rise in incomes has led to something like a building boom and a spending spree in the villages. With the decline of rural incomes in two consecutive years, Khrushchev's popularity with the kolkhozniki has also declined.

ONE SOCIAL TENSION, which is not quite new but has never been spoken of hitherto and is now aggravated, is the antagonism between the "wealthy" and the "poor" collective farms. The wealthy kolkhozes are those which are situated on the

KHRUSHCHEV'S ROSY PICTURE

It goes without saying that the lag in our agriculture as compared with yours in the sphere of mechanization and labor productivity is a temporary thing. The socialist system of agriculture makes it possible to overcome this lag within a short time and attain a labor productivity higher than on your farms. It offers boundless scope for developing production since it knows neither crisis nor competition. In our country there is not and cannot be any danger of some farm being ruined. In our country we have a sufficiently high standard of agriculture, skilled personnel, and an engineering industry capable of manufacturing machinery needed for agriculture. We strive to accomplish integrated mechanization of all agricultural production processes by applying perfect machines and by utilizing the labor force in a more rational way and thus insuring greater output per person employed. We have remarkable machine operators who have attained higher labor productivity than on your best

farms in cultivating corn, cotton, sugar beet, and other crops.

All forces of the Soviet people, all efforts of the Soviet people are directed toward peaceful construction. We plan to produce and yield 164,000,000 to 180,000,000 tons of grain, 76,000,000 to 84,000,000 tons of sugar beets, at least 16,000,000 tons of beef, 100,000,000 to 105,000,000 tons of milk.

"The Soviet people are confident that these planned targets will not only be fulfilled, but will actually be overfilled.

"Already in 1959, the over-all output of milk in the Soviet Union was more than in the United States, and, within the next few years, we hope to overtake the United States, also, in the per capita output of this product and also in the production of butter per capita population."

—Excerpts from a speech to the Des Moines Chamber of Commerce, September 22, 1959.

more fertile soil or closer to big industrial centers and which have accumulated the larger stocks of cattle, machinery, etc. The sale of the machine tractor stations has done something to make rich kolkhozes richer, and consequently the poor poorer. In any case, from the poor collective farms the outcry now comes that Khrushchev's reform has increased inequality among the farming population, because only the wealthy kolkhozes were in a position to buy up the agricultural machinery he had put on sale. Surprisingly, this cry has been allowed to reverberate in the columns of *Selskaya Zhizn* ("Rural Life"), a paper with a large circulation in the countryside.

Among the industrial population, on the other hand, the feeling is widespread that Khrushchev has been allowing rural interests to take precedence over urban ones. There are enough groups around the Presidium to voice that feeling. A year ago Khrushchev was directly attacked at the Central Committee for discriminating in favor of the farmers and against the workers by letting rural incomes rise faster than industrial wages. He had to wind up the December, 1959, session

with a solemn assurance that he would not allow this "discrimination" to go on. Since then the criticisms have been repeated, however, this time in connection with a wider egalitarian pressure that comes from factories—a pressure otherwise directed against the bureaucracy and the managerial groups rather than against the peasantry.

These manifestations of conflicting social pressures are probably the most significant new development in the Soviet body politic, where no such manifestations have been allowed for nearly thirty years. For a régime with a totalitarian tradition, this is in many respects a critical development. It has already led to the clamor raised from various rural quarters for a national organization of farmers. This demand was also discussed at the Central Committee in December, 1959. The clamor has now been renewed in connection with the forthcoming session of the Central Committee. The dilemma it presents is obvious: can the present system permit the development of a powerful nationally organized pressure group representing the farming interest? The last time the call for a national peasant organization

was heard (and suppressed) was around 1925. That it should resound now once again, in circumstances changed beyond recognition, is no mean indication of ferments in the depth of Soviet society and of the yearning of various social groups for a genuine and autonomous representation.

The Epoch of Agrotown?

The immediate issue before Khrushchev and his government is whether to continue the "promuzhik" policy of recent years or to reverse it or modify it. This is the issue that the Central Committee has to resolve.

A possible clue to the way the decision may go, is the report, which comes from Kazakhstan, of the wholesale organization of Agrotowns there. (It will be remembered that around 1950 Khrushchev played with this idea but was disavowed by Stalin.) With the Agrotown, which leaves far less scope than does the present kolkhoz for individual incentives and profits, Soviet farming would move a long way toward the pattern of the Chinese communes, although in the Soviet Union this pattern would be applied on a much higher level of agricultural technology than in China.

It is still difficult to judge the full significance of the reports about the "new great movement for Agrotowns" in Soviet Central Asia. Curiously, only the *Pravda* of Kazakhstan speaks about it—the Moscow *Pravda* has so far been silent about it, although the authorities in Kazakhstan say openly that the initiative for the new move has come from Moscow.

It is possible that the Agrotowns are being set up only on the virgin-soil farms, whose population does not have any genuine peasant tradition and may not resent or resist the change. But it is just as likely that Kazakhstan has been chosen as the testing ground for a pilot project, and that presently the "epoch of Agrotown" will be inaugurated for the whole of the Soviet Union. If so, rural Russia is on the eve of a tremendous upheaval.

Is Khrushchev ready to start this upheaval? This is the question to which the January session of the Central Committee will almost certainly provide the answer.

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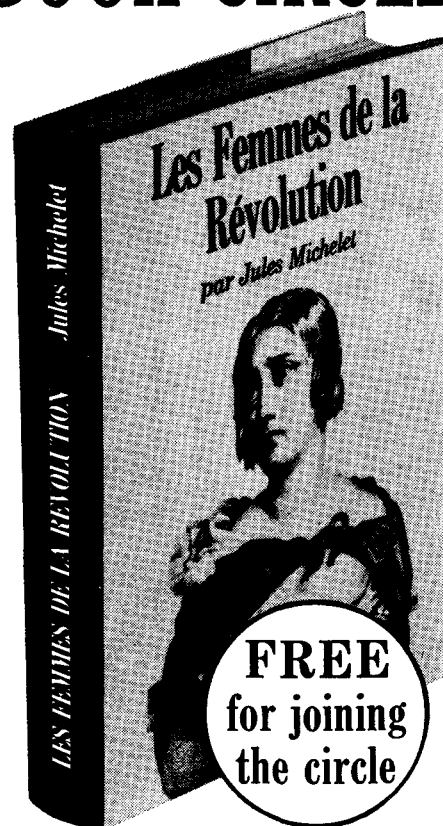
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The Hunger Strike

FRANK O'CONNOR

REVOLUTIONS and civil wars are brutal and messy things, and the results are rarely satisfactory. At least, that was so with the Irish Revolution. We had forced the English to come to terms and then had a civil war as to whether the terms were good enough. Month by month war between the Free State and De Valera's mythical Republic grew more embittered and unscrupulous, and I was sick to death of raids and ambushes.

Imprisonment would almost have been a relief, but on my first night in a Cork jail a young fellow was brought in who had been beaten and bayoneted by the Free Staters. In the early morning I held his hand, which had been beaten to the consistency of putty, walked with him to the head of the iron stairs, and stood watching him as he staggered painfully down in the gaslight. A few days later he was executed.

After that the internment camp in Gormanston was a relief. It was an American Army Air Force camp dating from the First World War, and its plumbing still functioned in a sort of way. Each morning I rose before anyone else was awake, took a cold shower and a brisk walk of a couple of miles round the compound, and prepared my lessons for the day. I taught Advanced Irish and—later—German.

But I had only been in the camp a few days when one morning, preparing my lessons, I noticed a gap in my education. I opened an Irish grammar for what must have been the first time, and the shock nearly

killed me. M. Jourdain's astonishment on discovering that he had been talking prose all his life was nothing to mine on discovering that I had been talking grammar, and bad grammar at that. It is one of the drawbacks of being completely self-educated that one can even overlook grammar.

I sometimes wonder whether that belated discovery of grammar, particularly of the objective case, did not change my whole character. It gave me at last a standard for what was right and wrong, and I found myself arguing against the other men in the big American hut where I slept. One evening I sat listening to a Corkman in a little group who was singing about some hero who had died for Ireland and the brave things he had said and the fine things he had done. I suddenly realized that the subject of the song was the boy whose hand I had held in the prison in Cork only a short time before, and suddenly the whole nightmare came back. "It's as well for you fellows that you didn't see his face when the Free Staters had finished with it!" I said.

I think it was that evening the big row blew up and I had half the hut shouting at me. I shouted back that I was sick to death of the worship of martyrdom, that the only martyr I had ever come close to was a poor boy from the lanes like myself, and he hadn't wanted to die any more than I did. "And Pearse?" somebody kept on crying, invoking the name of the leader of the 1916 Revolution. "I suppose he didn't want to die

either?" "Of course he didn't want to die," I replied. "He woke up too late, that was all." I was beginning to wake up myself.

All the same, that summer was exceedingly happy. When the weather was fine, I held my classes on the grass outside the school hut. I lived a healthier life than I could have lived at home; I had regular and pleasant work to do, and now that I had mastered the difficulties of grammar I knew I was doing it well. For me who had lived all my life by faith, it was an exhilarating experience to know I really was doing something well. In fact, it was the nearest thing I could have found to life on a college campus, the only one I was really fitted for, and I should have been perfectly happy except that I was still doing it at my mother's expense. I knew what those weekly parcels that she sent me cost—the cake, the tin of cocoa, the tin of condensed milk, and the box of cigarettes—and I realized that she must be going out to daily work to earn them for me. My surmise turned out to be true one day when one of the soldiers, who had served with Father in the old Munster Fusiliers got himself transferred to the garbage collection and brought me a letter from her. She had got work in the house of a plumber on Summerhill who was supposed to have "influence" and would try to get me released. In an emotional fit I replied that when I got out I would not be a burden to her for long, and she replied in a sentence that I knew did not apply particularly to me and was merely