

# The crippled agricultural system of the Soviet Union

by Rachel Douglas

How could the country that built the *Energiya* heavy space launch vehicle, for example, only be capable of growing a little more than half the grain per acre that the American farmer does? Readers may find it useful to know some of the history of agriculture in the Russian Empire and its imperial dominions.

## Obliteration in the name of collectivization

Of the 559 million hectares of land in agricultural use (excluding forestry and some other uses) in the Soviet Union in 1986, 553.2 million hectares belonged to state farms (*sov-khozy*), collective farms (*kolkhozy*), or the private plots of *kolkhoz* workers. The process that led to this arrangement was one of the greatest agrarian upheavals in history and one of the most terrible mass murders, by starvation and outright butchery, of any people during this century. That was the collectivization of agriculture in the Soviet Union.

Up until the second half of the 19th century, most peasants in the Russian empire were serfs. The serf was obliged to toil on the landowner's estate for life. Within the villages on the estates, his affairs were ordered by the peasant collective, the *mir*, which is also the Russian word for the whole world.

The abolition of serfdom, decreed by Tsar Aleksandr II in 1861, occurred with much confusion and with compromises to satisfy the powerful landed aristocracy of Russia. The supposedly emancipated serfs were required to pay a "redemption fee," a tax, so that the landowners would be compensated for the loss of their "souls" (as the serfs were called), and of the 20% or so of their land that was turned over, not to the individual peasants, but to the *mir*. But the ex-serfs had scant hope of obtaining funds to pay the fee—except if they continued to farm their former masters' land for decades. The *mir* persisted, as did the system by which land was divided among the peasants from generation to generation. There was no rule of primogeniture, or inheritance by the first-born son, the way estates and farms were kept intact over the years in many Western countries. In the Russian empire, the system of land-holding was called re-

partitional tenure; the land was constantly divided and redivided into ever smaller strips, for all the sons of the next generation.

Pyotr A. Stolypin, prime minister of Russia under Tsar Nicholas II from 1906 until 1911, said in 1908 that *de facto* "serfdom to the commune [*mir*] and the oppression of family property provide bitter bondage for 90 million people."<sup>1</sup> Under Stolypin's Agrarian Law of November 1906, the government threw its support behind the creation of individual, as opposed to communal or family, land ownership. The law gave incentives for the consolidation of the tiny strips of land into larger plots to make individual farmsteads, and penalized attempts to block this reform.

By 1911, nine million households of independent farmers had been established under Stolypin's reform. He held this development to be essential for the improvement of Russian agriculture and the prevention of peasant insurgencies, which he knew were being manipulated against the regime. "In another 10 or 15 years," Stolypin said, "we will be able to turn up our nose at all the revolutions. If only history will accord us this delay."<sup>2</sup>

That was not to be. In 1911, Stolypin was assassinated by an agent of the *Okhrana*, the secret police that was the instrument of the land-owning noble families, whose leaders by that time were committed to overthrowing the Romanov dynasty and considered a peasant rebellion to be their ultimate weapon.

## Stalin's collectivization

Six years later, the Bolsheviks were in power. It is not possible, in this space, to describe the trammeling of agriculture during the Russian Civil War (1918-20), nor the agricultural policy debates of the 1920s. Suffice it to say that when Stalin and the Bolshevik Central Committee decreed the collectivization of agriculture in 1929, the axe fell first on the somewhat-better-off peasants, many of whom had gotten started under the Stolypin reforms. Such a peasant was a *kulak*, from the Russian for "big fist." They comprised some 20% of the peasant population and they held 40% of the land.

The collectivization drive soon rose to the task of “liquidation of the *kulaki* as a class.” The target list spread to middle peasants and anybody who opposed collectivization; they could be deported to Siberia or shot as a sub-*kulak* or even as *kulak*-minded.

The full dimensions of what happened in the Soviet countryside during the 1930s are still not known. At the time, it was hidden from the outside world. Statistics should not be allowed to blur a tragedy or substitute for the full revelation of a crime, but in this case the numbers begin to tell the terrible story. As more becomes known, the numbers go up.

In 1968, historian Robert Conquest wrote that “examination of all the estimates, and all the accounts, seems to show that over 5 million deaths from hunger and from the diseases of hunger is the best estimate” for the U.S.S.R. in the 1930s. That doesn’t count executions and deaths of deportees on the road to Siberia, where at least 3 million peasants landed in labor camps.

Stalin told Winston Churchill that 10 million *kulaki* had to be “dealt with.”<sup>3</sup> In December 1987, Soviet demographer Mark Tolts revealed in the weekly *Ogonyok*, that Stalin had overstated the total Soviet population as 168 million in 1934, after the height of the famine, when the real number was 158 million. This past spring, Academician Vladimir Tikhonov of the Soviet Academy of Agricultural Sciences said that the number of farm families dropped by 3 million between 1929 and 1933.

The killings and famine in the Ukraine, the richest grain-growing area in the Soviet empire, were a massive act of genocide against Ukrainians. The London *Independent* reported last July on the finding by an international commission of inquiry into the Ukrainian famine, that “more people died during the famine—around 7.5 million—than in the Jewish holocaust, yet this catastrophe is little known outside the Ukrainian exile circles.”

Collectivization, Conquest summarized, “destroyed about 25% of the productive capacity of Soviet agriculture.” As the collectivization teams approached, terrified peasants slaughtered their livestock, rather than surrender them. Half the horses in Russia died in a five-year period. In two months during 1930, 14 million head of cattle were killed, and so were one-third of the hogs in the entire country and one out of four of the sheep and goats.<sup>4</sup>

Those who joined the collectives were then faced with forcible requisitioning of their crops. Farmers who buried grain to keep some for their families could be shot for stealing from the state. “If the peasant had produced only enough for his own subsistence, leaving none for the state, local enforcement officials reversed that procedure. The last sacks of grain were taken from the barns for export while famine raged. Butter was sent abroad while Ukrainian infants were dying for lack of milk.”<sup>5</sup>

After the 1930s came World War II, during which, battles raged across the whole Ukraine and the black-earth agricul-

tural zone of southern Russia.

Soviet agriculture after the war was rebuilt by the people who were left after collectivization. The most productive, enterprising peasants were gone, the remaining population traumatized and resigned.

Especially in the Russian peasant population, it is most clear to this day how economic success is fundamentally a question of culture. The Soviet government says that agriculture receives more than one-fourth of all investment in the national economy, yet production and productivity have stagnated. The reported average per hectare yield of grain crops fell from 16 centners/hectare (a centner is about 110 pounds) in 1976-80 to 14.9 centners/hectare in 1981-85, before an alleged rebound in the next two years.

It is not that Soviet science does nothing for plant hybridization, machinery design, fertilizers, or insecticides. The fate of a new technology or a new machine, sacrificed into the hands of the *kolkhozniki*, is oblivion or destruction as often as not; many stories in the Soviets’ own press attest to that.

On Aug. 6, the Communist daily *Pravda* interviewed Vasili A. Starodubtsev, chairman of the All-Russian Council of Kolkhozy, on the deep demoralization in the Soviet rural areas. The countryside was battered and ruined long ago, he said, and “there is where the peasant lost the remainder of his faith, and cracked up himself, and fell into apathy—or worse, into drunkenness. . . . No, the past has not gone without a trace.” To this day, “some people try to besmirch the experience of the best [workers]. They claim that ‘kulakism’ has robbed resources. What do they mean, ‘kulakism’? We are behind U.S.A. agriculture in capital intensity, and if you include storage and processing . . . many times behind.”

Gorbachov’s legislation to allow peasants to take out 50-year leases on land, which is supposed to inspire higher productivity than on collective farms, got a lot of publicity in the West. Nobody should think for a minute that such reforms will reduce the Soviet demand for food from the rest of the world. Soviet agriculture is the most intractable Soviet economic problem, because to fix it would mean to shift the deeply ingrained, demoralized cultural outlook of the Russian peasant, which subsumes a real hostility to technological improvements, such that increased investment in Soviet agriculture has been like pouring rubles down a sinkhole. Precisely that sour, cynical view of the world, however, is what an empire needs for its slaves.

#### Notes

1. Alexander V. Zenkovsky, *Stolypin: Russia's Last Great Reformer*, The Kingston Press, Princeton, 1986, p. 14. This new translation of a memoir by one of Stolypin’s associates records the debates surrounding his economic and administrative reforms and gives the text of the 1906 agrarian law.
2. Aleksandr V. Gerasimov, *Tsarisme et Terrorisme*, Paris, 1934, p. 297.
3. Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror*, Collier Books, New York, 1973, pp. 46-7.
4. Alex de Jonge, *Stalin and the Shaping of the Soviet Union*, William Morrow & Co., New York, 1986, p. 237.
5. Conquest, p. 45.