

Grain harvest emergency heightens Gorbachov's woes

by Konstantin George and Rachel Douglas

The combination of drought in some key Soviet grain-growing regions, and the woeful inadequacy of infrastructure to handle a record harvest in others, threatens to worsen the already severe food crisis in the U.S.S.R. In response to this looming catastrophe, Mikhail Gorbachov and other Soviet leaders have announced the need for emergency measures, but the measures themselves are likely to trigger new political clashes and explosions of unrest.

At a July 28 emergency meeting in Moscow of Communist Party leaders from drought-stricken provinces of the Russian Republic, addressed by Gorbachov, the talk was of compensating for the shortages there, with the increased production of Ukraine and southern Russia. The drought center happens to overlap the area in western Siberia where miners went on strike in July, as well as important industrial towns, in which the Soviet leaders cannot afford to have the food shortages get much worse. The surplus regions, especially Ukraine, have a murderous, bitter history of being ravaged by Moscow rulers who cart off their food to feed Russians elsewhere.

The drought affects the north of Russia, the Urals, western Siberia, and Kazakhstan, encompassing approximately one-third of the grain acreage in the Soviet Union, according to what party agriculture chief Yegor Ligachov told the TV program "Vremya" on Aug. 2. Moreover, the drought is in its third year, in many places; Ligachov said that "very severe drought" affected 51% of grain acreage last year. Record low grain harvests in all of these regions are now certain for 1989.

Meanwhile, the bumper grain crop in the bread-basket regions—Ukraine, the North Caucasus, the Don River region, Krasnodar, and the Volga—is threatening to turn into record losses. Soviet infrastructure is simply too weak for the crop to be moved into storage in time, meaning that a great

portion will rot in the fields, on threshing floors, next to filled grain elevators, or at railroad sidings.

This twofold crisis prompted the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) on Aug. 1 to revise its estimate of the 1989 Soviet grain harvest down from 210 million tons, to a mere 200 million tons—only 5 million tons above the dismal harvest of 1988.

Infrastructure leakage

This year's harvest disaster is proving with a vengeance, that inadequate infrastructure, especially in Russia, is the Achilles heel of Soviet agriculture, a point which *EIR* has repeatedly stressed. The nightmare of Soviet agriculture is expressed by the dictum, "The greater the harvest, the greater the percentage of that harvest which will be lost in the transport and storage process." The loss curve rises far more steeply than the curve representing the harvest increase. The end result will be a very small increase, at best, in net grain available to the Soviet population through this year's bumper crop, compared with last year's poor crop.

The July 27 issue of the Soviet government paper *Izvestia* reported the completion of the harvest in southern Russia, with excellent grain yields, surpassing by 20% and in some cases even doubling the yields of the 1978 record harvest. How much of that grain will end up in bread loaves is questionable, as *Izvestia* then described the problem in the bread-basket, region by region. First in the North Caucasus:

"The mighty flow of grain is literally overflowing the elevators and reception points. The problem of rapid shipment . . . to other regions of the country and to the center has arisen in all its magnitude. . . . Every day half the number of rail cars ordered arrive. . . . The picture is frankly depressing. Wrestling such a pleasing and big grain harvest from

the rains, only to be unable to cope with it at the elevators.”

Then, the situation in the Rostov on Don region:

“The harvest on the Don has long passed its peak and mountains of excellent grain have accumulated on the threshing floors, while at the elevators there are not just mountains, but ‘Everests’ of grain. . . . Capacities are crammed. . . . The grain is not being shipped out. . . . Even in previous years, the mass disorder in organizing purchases frequently led to a situation where the farms would fulfill and overfulfill deliveries, yet thousands of tons of grain would meanwhile become soaked on the elevators’ open platforms. It may be said that the results of all our efforts are perishing before the villagers’ eyes.”

In Krasnodar *krai* (territory) the situation was even worse. The head of the grain products administration of Krasnodar told *Izvestia* that, due to the shortage of rail cars, only half of the 500,000 tons of grain that had to be shipped out of the region’s grain elevators by the end of July, to clear the backlog accumulating on the open threshing floors, had actually been sent. He added, “What are we to use to ship the grain, if there are no grain cars? Of course, we could use automotive transport, but there is no fuel.”

Emergency for industrial centers

This was the pattern in the record harvest regions, especially in the *Russian* portion of the bread-basket. Far worse is the near total loss of crops, due to the prolonged drought in the Urals and western Siberia. This will compound the already extreme food shortages in this region, which is one of the U.S.S.R.’s most vital industrial and war production hubs. The Urals and western Siberia industrial workforce, as the July strike wave showed, was already seething with discontent, especially over the food and consumer goods shortages.

At the July 28 meeting, Gorbachov forewarned of drastic food transfer measures, to ensure that adequate food stocks reach the Urals and western Siberia industrial workforce. Having narrowly escaped the July mass strike’s going out of control, Gorbachov cannot tolerate more unrest in the Russian heartland. Nor can he allow anything to jeopardize the implementation of the Soviet war plan, relying on that industrial production base, or he would soon lose his mandate to rule, and be unceremoniously dumped. An explosion and prolonged instability among the Urals workforce would set into motion such a chain of events.

Gorbachov acknowledged this fundamental economic and political reality, when he said the drought was ravaging “regions where the country’s most important industrial centers are located.” In the Aug. 2 interview, Ligachov spelled it out: “Approximately 45-50 million people live in that [drought-stricken] territory. In these regions—the Urals, West Siberia, and Kazakhstan—there are very large centers of power engineering, the fuel industry, machine-building, and major scientific centers.”

Gorbachov called for meeting the shortfall there through “the maximum output possible from regions where a good harvest has been grown.”

Requisitioning

“Where a good harvest has been grown” was identified at the July 28 meeting by Politburo member Viktor Nikonov, co-chairman, with Ligachov, of the party Central Committee’s Commission on agricultural policy. “There is a good harvest in the Ukraine, North Caucasus, central Chernozem *oblasts* [black earth provinces], Volga district, central R.S.F.S.R. [Russian Republic], Moldavia, Belorussia, and the Baltic,” Nikonov reported. Ligachov agreed, that the harvest is “fantastic” in southern Russia and “good” in Ukraine, Belorussia, and Moldavia.

Gorbachov’s words, and those of Nikonov and Ligachov, foretell that Moscow will vastly increase the amount of grain and food requisitioned from the non-Russian surplus areas, in particular Ukraine, Belorussia, Moldavia, and the Baltic Republics, to feed the Russian hinterland.

Such food transfers from non-Russian republics to Russia are identical in substance, minus only the flamboyant rhetoric, to what the Russian supremacist Pamyat Society and sister organizations such as the Otechestvo (Fatherland) Society have been demanding loudly over the past few months. They have been screaming the Big Lie that Russia has been subsidizing the other republics by shipping food and goods there, while the non-Russian republics enjoy a free ride at Russia’s expense. Pamyat demands a reversal, by which the other republics begin supporting Russia with food and goods.

In past Soviet great food crises, Moscow has reverted to this brutal policy: Requisition whatever food was required to keep the Russian industry and war industry centers running, regardless of whether that meant death for hundreds of thousands of non-Russians (as happened in 1947 in Moldavia) or even millions of non-Russians (as in Ukraine, in 1932-33). With the summer’s drought and the threat of emergency measures, the specter of mass hunger looms again.

Pravda of Aug. 8 hinted of potential Ukrainian resistance to requisitioning. Reporting from Poltava Oblast, Ukraine, where the harvest is 20% above plan, *Pravda* said that producers, who under Gorbachov’s reforms “now determine themselves, what quantity of grain to sell the state above plan,” are not anxious to make more deliveries, once the original “state order” has been met. They are unhappy because the elevators cannot take the grain fast enough for it to remain in good condition, i.e., before it gets rained on (and, once damaged, commands a lower price). They have demands for better housing, other amenities, and construction supplies for their farms.

Fights over food supplies in the Soviet Union, not to mention the outbreak of famine, will bring an ugly shift not only within the Soviet empire, but in the entire international strategic situation.