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0964

USSR: Agriculture

31 March 1971

BREZHNEV ON AGRICULTURE

Summary: In Brezhnev's Congress report pride of place was accorded to the announcement of the precise figure for the biggest Soviet grain harvest on record. His report on what Brezhnev termed the "most complex and difficult sector in our economy" was restrained, perhaps in deference to the fact that the gross farm output goal was not met. Nonetheless, the overall achievement was far better than any registered by his predecessors. He promised to raise investments in agriculture, strengthen the private plots, as well as the inter-farm production organizations, and stress quality in food and consumer products.

Brezhnev's Congress report on agricultural developments was a model of restraint compared to his predecessor's rhetorical efforts, particularly since the past five years had been the most productive on record.

"Agriculture," Brezhnev told the delegates, "for a number of reasons was and still remains the most complex and difficult sector in our economy." (1) Backed up by the 1970 largest grain harvest (186 million tons) and cotton crop (6.9 million tons) in Soviet history, along with high returns in livestock products, Brezhnev cited an average annual increase of 21 per cent in gross agricultural output during the last plan period (1966-70) compared to a 12 percent rise reached

during Khrushchev's last five years.

Nonetheless, Brezhnev had to admit that the target for gross farm output was not realized: instead of the 25 per cent average annual increase as planned, a 21 per cent growth was registered during the last five-year plan period. Although many of the component goals in plan output were reached--sugar beets, cotton, meat, milk, eggs, wool--the overall target was not reached because grain, potatoes, industrial crop, vegetables and sundry crops failed to perform to plan. However, the grain crop barely missed its apogee: 167.4 million tons realized compared to an average annual 169.4 million tons planned. Where Khrushchev and Stalin used to be 30 million tons wide of their mark, Brezhnev and Kosygin have for all purposes hit the bulls-eye--the first time since collectivization.

The grain achievement warrants a hard look in order to assess the future. In the past five years grain output fluctuated from 148 million tons a year (1967) to 186 million (1970), a difference of 28 million tons, equivalent to the total grain output of Poland and Rumania. This extreme variation illustrates the hazards of Soviet agriculture: unfavorable climatic conditions which only a higher degree of intensification (investment) can correct. At that, the last plan period was characterized by unusually favorable weather conditions--only one year in five was plagued by drought (the usual ratio is two dry years out of five). On the need to restructure the grain crop, switching from cereal to feed grains to bolster the livestock industry, Brezhnev did not elaborate.

The highest goal of public production under socialism, Brezhnev declared, is more fully to satisfy the material and cultural demands of the people. He admitted, as Kremlin leaders have generally been forced to in recent years, that the growing demand for consumer goods, particularly meat and other foods, is not being completely met and that this problem must be solved in the future.

The rise in livestock production presents an urgent and sharp task and only a mighty step forward can resolve the problem, Brezhnev declared. Although mastering the feed problem is the key issue, he failed to face that problem head-on, i.e. to envisage a change of the area from cereal grains to feed grains.

Tribute was paid to the important role private herds played in the supply of meat and milk for the population. He warned that the state and collective farms must assist private plotters with the acquisition of animals and feed stocks, a lesson which is "not being taken into account in many places."

The upsurge in agriculture, he claimed, depends not only on the peasants and rural people but equally on the output of industrial workers, applied science, and technology. During the past plan the supply of machinery, fertilizers, electricity, and consumer goods was not fulfilled and responsibility for the failure of agriculture lies also with the urban sector.

The flow of investment into agriculture would reach 129 billion rubles in the new plan, seven billion higher than was previously proposed. The Party supports the channelling of funds into developments as inter-kolkhoz and state-and-kolkhoz enterprises, production cooperatives, and the creation of agro-industrial complexes as means to put agricultural production on an industrial basis, the General Secretary declared.

A new aspect of food and consumer goods planning was the recognition that as disposable consumer incomes rose, the need to concentrate on the quality of goods became imperative. The Central Committee, he declared, was ready to face this question of quality in goods in all its "sharpness and with all frankness." It is a promise not easily forgotten by the Soviet consumer.

(1) Pravda, 31 March 1971.