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DUST STORMS AND THE GRIT OF UKRAINIAN POLITICS

Summary: The creation of emergency committees at local, district, and regional levels to combat the "natural calamity" caused by hurricanes and dust storms in the Ukraine corroborates a previous projection on the seriousness of the winter wheat situation in the Ukraine. At the same time it casts a shadow on the stature and career of Ukrainian party boss, Shelest, generally considered a main advocate of intervention in Czechoslovakia, already beset with problems of nationalist aspirations and dissident intellectuals in the Ukraine.

Further corroboration of the serious state of the Soviet winter wheat fields in the north Caucasus, Lower Volga, and the Ukraine now comes from the Ukraine, the largest producer of winter wheat in the Soviet Union. Most of the definitive reports to date on the natural catastrophe had come from the north Caucasus, but general growing conditions in the Ukraine were known to be quite serious in certain regions of the republic (1).

Radio Kiev broadcast a report on February 26 that a republic committee had been created "to fight the natural calamity and eliminate its effects." The ad hoc committee is headed by N.A. Sobol, member of the Ukrainian CP Politburo and first deputy chairman of the Ukrainian Council of Ministers. The hurricanes and dust storms have seriously damaged not only agriculture, but also transportation,

- (1) See RFE Research report "Soviet Winter Wheat - A Bleak Outlook," 24 February 1969, cz, for an evaluation of the existing crisis in the winter grains.

power utilities, and other services for industrial and consumer needs in recent weeks. Sobol reported considerable damage wrought to buildings in the urban and rural areas mainly in "some southern regions of the republic."

As a measure of the gravity of the "natural calamity," the commissions were set up on city, district, and regional bases, Radio Kiev reported. This appears to be a significant development, as the Russian Federation did not appoint similar relief committees for the stricken north Caucasus territory, contiguous to the Ukraine. As such emergency decisions are made at a higher level, it is rather certain that approval came from Pyotr Shelest, the First Secretary of the Ukrainian CP.

Crop Losses

While relief measures can be immediately activated in urban and industrial sectors, the state of the important winter wheat seedings cannot be fully restored. Wind storms of hurricane velocity have blown the snow cover off the winter grain seedings in recent weeks, and followed by recurrent waves of freezing weather, did irreparable damage to the fall sown grains. Valuable topsoil was blown off the steppes in the affected areas, and it appears certain that the winter wheat crop will be decidedly short.

The Ukraine accounts for 60 percent of the winter wheat in the Soviet Union. It is concentrated in the southern and central regions of the republic. Over half the total grain fielded in the Ukraine is winter grain.

Last year the failure of the winter wheat crop was a serious setback to the Ukraine. There was a massive gap of 6.3 million tons between the planned and the realized output of grain for 1968 (2). The dimension of this failure equals the total grain output of Hungary.

A repeat of last year's poor winter grain crop -- and all indications now point to a short crop, depending on the areas affected -- could have political as well as economic reverberations. In the book for political apparatchiki, one bad crop caused by inclement weather is excusable, but two successive mishaps with grain are hard to live down and can be a debacle to a Politburo member's career.

(2) Pravda Ukrainy, 15 February 1967, 29 January 1969.

The extent of the Ukrainian winter grain damage, based on all sources to date (including Sobol), covers the eastern area, the whole southern tier of oblasts to the western border of Kherson region and up into the south-central Kirovograd oblast. This area would account for over half the Ukrainian winter wheat seedings. It appears certain that a short winter wheat crop will be harvested in the regions here mentioned, the efforts of the Sobol-Shelest committees notwithstanding.

Political Grit

After last year's fiasco with the Ukrainian grain harvest mentioned above, another such setback this year in the richest agricultural republic in the USSR could well tarnish the career of Shelest, party boss of the Ukraine. Natural calamities come and go, but two successive grain setbacks cannot be condoned on the honors list of Kremlin promotions. The dust storms that carried away the irreplaceable rich topsoil of the Ukraine could well sweep away a Politburo personality or two in its course. Generally recognized as the hard liner and protagonist for the armed invasion of Czechoslovakia, and already beset with nationalist strivings in the Ukraine, along with dissident intellectuals and artists demanding reforms, a second grain disaster could well be the graveyard of a party career.