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THOUGHTS ON THE WINTER WHEAT SETBACK

Summary: Western sources have recently speculated on a 10 percent damage to the Soviet winter grain crop caused by wind storms and freeze-out temperatures. A twenty percent shortfall in the winter wheat crop compared to last year seems a more realistic position. Spring grains will need to come through with another record performance to equal last year's output, hardly a likely sequence.

The serious winter grain crop situation has been a recurrent theme in the Soviet news media this winter. As winter wheat normally supplies forty percent of the marketable grain in the Soviet Union, the world's leading wheat producer, any setback to the crop that outyields spring wheat by almost double would mean serious damage to the national economy.

The issue at present is not the reality of the damage to the Soviet grain crop, but rather, the dimension of the current indicated losses. But on such strategic intelligence, needless to say, Soviet press reports are non-committal. Such precise data are carefully collected and analyzed by the first secretaries at raikom/obkom centers and at union-republic levels and kept confidentially.

Extensive winter-killing of fall-sown grains was reported from the north Caucasus, eastern and southern Ukraine, the lower Volga, and some areas of the central Black Soil Belt. These are contiguous areas and the heart of the winter wheat belt in the Soviet Union.

Of late several Western sources have set the damage to the winter grain crop at around ten percent. (1) This figure seems too low and, in fact, represents no more than a normal variation in output in some years. The aggregate losses, from all appearances, indicate a higher rate of loss than that given.

In projecting the dimensions of the loss in the winter grain crops it is essential to maintain a definitive approach to the problem. Winter grain losses are modified by two components: (1) in some areas, winter-killing has occurred whereby the plant growth has been killed and the area has to be completely reseeded to spring grains or other crops; (2) in other areas, the winter seedings have been weakened or partially killed but can still be saved through additional fertilization and care. In neither case, however, with some exception, will the original winter grain yield be compensated for. Another factor to consider is the distribution of the winter grain: wheat is the most important, with 19.7 million hectares, rye amounts to less than 12.4 million hectares, and barley fewer than one million hectares. (2) Rye is a less demanding crop on fertility and is thus grown in the poorer soils of north and western European Russia, while wheat, the more valuable crop, requires the better and warmer soils of south and southeast European Russia for normal growth. Under such conditions, wheat outyields rye almost two to one.

Winter rye losses are generally moderate as it is grown in cold regions with adequate snow coverage, while wheat requires more moderate weather and is thus grown in the more temperate zones where the snow cover, the protective shield for the fall-sown seedings, is less certain and its absence endangers the life of the young crop. Thus it is in the winter wheat regions that winter-killing losses are primarily concentrated; this is the area where the Soviet Union can least afford such losses.

The center of the current catastrophe lies in the North Caucasus, which along with the Ukraine, accounts for seventy percent of the winter wheat. In last year's neo-record harvest, the three oblasts of the North Caucasus yielded over eleven percent of the total grain deliveries in the USSR. The Kuban, the most fertile and productive general crop area in the country, last year grew the highest average yield of wheat -- 29 quintals per hectare, on 2.7 million hectares total. (3) This is as good a performance as anywhere in Canada or the USA on a similar area.

- (1) Reuter, CSM, 27 March, 1 April 1969.
- (2) Narkhoz 1967, page 348.
- (3) Selskaya zhizn, 26 July, 30 October 1968.

This year, however, the Kuban bread basket lies in the very heart of the catastrophe.

The Kuban (Krasnodar territory) is apparently the only major region where the extent of this year's winter damage can be assayed. It was officially reported in a dispatch on measures being undertaken to overcome the damage to the wheat crop that "one million more hectares of spring grain will be sown this year than usual." (4) As the area sown to grain and technical crops is normally four million hectares in the territory, it is clear that about one-fourth of the sown area was so badly damaged that it had to be reseeded with spring crops. An even larger share was weakened, and emergency measures such as fertilizing by aircraft were resorted to in order to save a damaged crop.

Last year the Ukraine suffered from a decimated winter wheat crop that resulted in a 21 percent drop in the overall grain output in the union republic. To contend now that the current winter grain crop, particularly wheat, would be on the order of about 10 percent destroyed, or 10 percent less than last year, is, on the basis of this projection, unrealistic and untenable.

A more precise, albeit tentative, forecast would indicate a 20 percent shortfall in the output of winter wheat this year over the past three-year average. It follows then there will be no bumper crop of winter grains this year, regardless of how favorable the weather may be for the balance of the growing season.

How large the overall cereal-grain harvest will be this year is still uncertain. The ten day to two week delay in the arrival of spring this season bodes ill in a country where the growing season is already normally short. At this stage of the season the outlook for the winter wheat crop is visibly bleak and foreboding, and a birds-eye view of the aggregate Soviet grain crop shows it far in arrears of the 190-200 million tons envisaged in the immediate years ahead. The eternal grain problem can only be considered solved when a shift from cereal grains to feed grains is effected following a series of abundant harvests -- a task still formidable and distant.

(4) Pravda, March 21, 1969.