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SOVIET WINTER WHEAT - A BLEAK OUTLOOK

Summary: Recurrent wind storms and extremely cold temperatures have caused serious losses in the fertile north Caucasus winter wheat regions this winter. Dust storms have raged from Siberia to the Ukraine stripping the steppes of the all-important snow cover and irreplaceable topsoil. A short winter grain crop is a certainty this year, and the overall outlook for grain in the year before the Lenin jubilee is at present unfavorable.

One of the severest winters of the century has dealt irreparable damage to the winter grain seedings in north Caucasus, one of the most productive granaries in the Soviet Union.

The winter hurricanes which blew up dust storms from the exposed grain fields, followed by three successive waves of sub-zero weather, have caused extensive winter-killing of the fall-sown grains in the Kuban, Rostov, and Stavropol regions of the north Caucasus and extended into eastern and southern areas of the Ukraine as well.

The full impact of the weather catastrophe has had piecemeal coverage in the Soviet press since January but lately, as emergency measures to combat the disaster were initiated, a steady account of regional conditions has appeared rather frequently in the central press (1).

The center of the catastrophe lies in the north Caucasus, along with the Ukraine, the main producer of winter wheat. In last year's near-record grain harvest, the three above mentioned regions of the north Caucasus

(1) Sovetskaya Rossiya, 24 January 1969.

accounted for over eleven percent of the total grain deliveries in the USSR. The Kuban, the most consistently productive area in the Soviet Union, sometimes called the "Iowa" of Russia, last year yielded the highest average returns on record for an entire region -- 29 quintals of grain per hectare, on 4.2 million hectares total (2). This year the Kuban bread basket lies in the very heart of the catastrophe.

The seriousness of the weather set-back is accentuated by the fact that it is concentrated in the rich winter wheat area. Winter wheat normally supplies forty percent of the marketable grain in the Soviet Union. It outyields spring wheat by almost two times. The annual yields are also more stable and the regions where it is grown also grow such valuable crops as sugar beets, sunflowers, and corn. The winter wheat regions are contiguous, so what affects one area often extends into parts of the other.

The stress in the press reports is quite naturally put on the measures to soften the blow of the catastrophe. The Rostov obkom has enacted a decree on measures to liquidate the effects of the dust storms and to assure the grain supply for 1969; Pravda speaks of the "very difficult situation" in the Stavropol fields; and a raikom secretary in the Kuban admits "the hurricane killed most of the winter grain," but, like a good agit-prop man, averred that "a catastrophe was avoided" (3).

It is clear from such piecemeal press and radio reports, the only available information on the state of the winter grains, that a good share of the winter cereals has been seriously damaged or killed. The emergency measures being taken all indicate a heavy loss: additional fertilizer allocation, more herbicides, and the importation of vast quantities of seeds for replanting. Changes in cropping practices will again be raised but the choice is limited. Winter-killed areas may be resown with spring grains or corn. But the climate of the north Caucasus, apart from the Kuban, is not wholly favorable to these crops. Yet the most adaptive of the crops is corn for both forage and grain. The heat is adequate in the Caucasus but the rainfall is too limited for normal yields as grain.

It will be recalled that last year the Ukraine suffered from a poor winter grain harvest while the north Caucasus had a good crop, but the really decisive performance was in spring grains, where the region from the

(2) Selskaya zhizn, 26 July, 30 October, 1968.

(3) Sovetskaya Rossiya, 15 February, 1969.
Pravda, 16 February, 1969.
Radio Moscow, 18, 20 and 23 February, 1969.

Volga to the Urals produced all-time record crops. This year, however, the dust storms and hurricanes have also hit the spring wheat regions mentioned, and although the fields are bare and unplanted, the absence of snow and loss of topsoil present a serious problem for a repeat of another record crop in the eastern spring wheat granaries.

Early Season Projection

It is certain the north Caucasus, one of two main winter wheat granaries, will have a short grain crop this year. It follows that there will be no bumper crop of winter grains in the Leninist jubilee year. How big the slippage from last year will be depends on the performance of the adjoining Ukraine. But latest reports from the south-east Ukraine tell of extreme dust storms not equalled in the 24 post-war years, the whole Donbass region being darkened two days by a curtain of dust (4). Other reports describe dust storms whipping bare of snow the grain fields in the southern Ukraine (5). At this stage then, the overall outlook for the total winter wheat crop is visibly bleak.

There is an added dimension to the dust storm/freeze-out in the Soviet grainlands this year. Some Western observers link up the disaster in the Caucasus to the power struggle in the Kremlin, even to a return of the Khrushchev corn program, his panacea for what ailed Soviet agriculture. The fact is that 80 percent of the marketable grain is raised in drought ridden regions, and weather set-backs are indigenous imponderables in Soviet agriculture (6). In the final analysis, there is only one alternative for the millions of winter-killed hectares -- replanting with small grains and corn, distinctly inferior crops to winter grains.

(4) Trud, 19 February, 1969.

(5) Radio Moscow, 17 and 23 February, 1969, Pravda, 24 Febr. 1969.

(6) Sovetskaya Rossiya, 24 January 1969.