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MASTERS OF THE LAND - II

The Dialogue Gains Strength

The revolutionary proposals to assign large areas of Soviet cropland to small mechanized teams of skilled farm workers which would be responsible for the entire field operations over a period of years were almost wholly confined to the pages of Komsomolskaya Pravda. Although it now appears the experiment in the decentralization of farm labor organization had been quietly under way on a small number of collective and state farms for some time, it was not given national recognition until an agronomist from the Altai territory, V. Zhulin, described his experience in Komsomolskaya Pravda under the provocative title "Who Are You, Master of the Land?"¹

It is not accidental that the organ of the Young Communist League has been the main spokesman and advocate of the mechanized team system in the USSR's collectivized agriculture. The appeal of belonging to a mechanized team (zveno) with its implied freedom of decision-making in fully mechanized farm operations has an understandably strong attraction for young people. The Soviet youth newspaper has often warned that the flight of young people from the farms to the cities has created a serious labor shortage in precisely the farm sector where it is most needed -- in mechanization -- and that reversing the drain of young manpower was a primary task in improving labor productivity in the countryside. Accordingly, in direct appeal to the rural youth, Komsomolskaya Pravda has been in the vanguard of publishing pioneering innovations in the organization of Soviet agriculture. What Stalin condemned as "distortions in kolkhoz labor organization," the Young Communist League organ now champions: an independent mechanized team as the primary means of raising labor productivity in the urgent national task of boosting output in agriculture.

1) 7 August 1965. See also RFE Research reports, "Masters of the Land," 10 August 1965 and 25 September 1965, for a detailed analysis of the Zhulin proposals.

The team versus brigade debate has been a controversial political and ideological issue ever since collectivization in the early 1930s. It was argued that the splintering of the farm labor brigade into independent small work teams might eventually supplant not only the brigade but also the kolkhoz itself. Such a development, in the official Party reasoning, would endanger the entire structure of socialized agriculture. So it comes as a distinct change in the direction of the political winds that Pravda finally has published an article in support of the team system for the organization of farm labor.² Under the heading, "Every Field its Own Master," a staff correspondent describes at length the experiences of a state farm in Volgograd Oblast with an "experiment" in the "fundamentally new method" of the mechanized team.

Volgograd Oblast is one of the largest granaries in the Soviet Union. It was one of the top four producers in this year's record harvest, but its long-term performance is checkered with poor yields because of drought. There are over 38,000 "mechanizers" (machine operators) in the oblast. Each of them, aided by several helpers, tills an average of 150 hectares of plowland and produces about 100 tons of grain -- not a high labor output. The main task, the Pravda correspondent writes, is to bring order into the utilization of the land and machinery. "The hectare has for too long been an orphan. Everyone bosses it around: the team, the brigade, the section (sub-farm), the sovkhoz, [but] no one in particular." One plans, another prepares the soil, a third the sowing, a fourth the harvesting. But nobody is held responsible for the harvest.

All this buildup sounds remarkably similar to Zhulin's charges in the pioneering Komsomolskaya Pravda piece mentioned above.

Now an energetic manager of a sub-farm of the sovkhoz presents his plan which is almost a replica of the Zhulin model. But the Pravda piece is careful to qualify its features with the introduction: "Having obtained approval at the district and province levels," the foreman proceeds to divide all the plowland up among the mechanizers. There are 411 hectares for each team. Additionally, each team was assigned a tractor and plow, a combine and other machinery, and assigned hitchmen and helpers. In four of the teams two mechanizers decided to work in pairs. Two others preferred to work separately. The teams agree to draw lots for the different land areas to compensate for differences in soil fertility.

2) Pravda, 30 August 1966.

Standard sovkhos wage rates would be in force, but a premium would be paid for plan fulfillment amounting to one-fourth of the average monthly earnings for each centner of grain. In addition, over-plan fulfillment would be honored with a 20 per cent supplementary payment. So each mechanized team had its own field to plow, sow, and reap and they went to work.

A telling observation was made by the manager:

This year the people made do with their own forces for the first time. The main thing was that everyone began to think in a different way. After all, there was no one to fall back on. What you sow, that shall you reap.

[Emphasis supplied]

At harvest's end the results were impressive. In the sovkhos as a whole each mechanizer produced an average of 118 tons of grain, but the independent teams operating their section averaged 378 tons. Each of the latter had earnings three times higher than the rank-and-file mechanizers on the state farm.

The Pravda correspondent maintains that the entire sovkhos on which the experiment was carried out is now shifting over to the new organization of labor. The article winds up with the idyllic observation: "The first shoots have come up. They are a joy to see. The experiment is continuing."

It is significant in the year of a record harvest that Pravda prints such a revisionist model for the reorganization of socialist farming. Generally, bumper harvest years have usually been followed by restrictive agrarian measures, while poor years usually yielded concessions to the peasantry. Perhaps, the new leadership in the Kremlin will depart from the Stalin-Khrushchev pattern of the past and continue their innovations inaugurated during the last two years.

Another assist for the independent team system has just appeared in the cultured pages of Literaturnaya Gazeta,³ another journal that has espoused liberal views on agricultural affairs. A well-known writer, B. Mozhaev, under the lead "self-reliance", cites compelling arguments for the creation of independent teams, "the smaller the better." Based on a visit he made to Byelorussia (Grodno oblast) he describes several farms which began experimenting two and three years ago with small teams of five to six mechanizers, each equipped with three tractors and combines for 400-450 hectares of land. The land was attached to the team for a year on a crop rotation basis with 55 per cent under grain and the balance in potatoes, flax, and sugar beets. The system pro-

duced such strong incentive response among the workers that in a year grain yields rose from 6-7 quintals per hectare to 15.5, potato yields rose from 60-70 centners to 230 centners per hectare, and incomes rose proportionately.

Another kolkhoz in the same district operating under the same system raised the average grain yield from 9 to 18 quintals per hectare, while sugar beets rose from 140 to 300 quintals per hectare. One team had a planned production output of 98,000 rubles a year but the final output reached 120,000 rubles. So each team member earned 140 rubles a month, and every ruble expended in the production process yielded a profit of 30 kopecks to the farm.

With the increase in labor production accounted for by the mechanized team operating a specific area of cropland, some workers became redundant, the journalist observed. What will become of them, he asked the kolkhoz chairman. The chairman assured him that the displaced field workers would move into the expanding branches of the farm such as livestock production. But the benefits of labor efficiency would finally free the women from field labor and that should be main a objective of kolkhoz policy. A well paid head of a farm household is the solution to liberate women from field work, the chairman asserted.

The independent team, Mozhaev argues, is not only involved in a technological process but a social one as well. It is necessary to raise the self-reliance of the peasant, he continues. A peasant working under the team conditions feels himself master of the land, feels it his responsibility to distribute his labor rationally. As a result his personality grows, the land no longer is an orphan, but responds to its master rather than to words. The old tradition within the family where love of the land is handed down from father to son is a matter of great importance to the state and should be cultivated, Mozhaev asserts. He adds that this feeling of self-reliance and confidence can be stimulated among the peasantry through the system of small mechanized teams. If the state lays down a delivery schedule for the farms for five years ahead, he argues, the farm should know for sure just what it will receive in material inputs for the same period.

These are heady words but not unexpected from so literate and liberal a journal. The discussions in both Pravda and Literaturnaya Gazeta stand in bold contrast to the conservative approach of Selskaya Zhizn,⁴ the official organ of the Ministry of Agriculture. There, under the heading "Master of the Land," an account of a long-tenure agronomist on the huge state farm "Gigant" is given recognition as a supposedly fitting example of a "master of the land."

4) 4 October 1966.

Balance Sheet

The discussion of measures to improve the organizational structure of the labor force on collective and state farms so as to instill a feeling of personal responsibility for the land and its performance in both the skilled and the rank-and-file farm worker has gained impetus in a favorable report in the pages of Pravda and a follow-up in the literary daily. The size and functional rights of farm labor units -- whether the present system of using large work brigades should be replaced by small mechanized teams of workers assigned definite areas of cropland for several years or longer -- is the kernel of controversy. Soviet resolution of the brigade-team debate in favor of the team would have distinct reverberations in the agrarian policies of other communist countries and could well initiate great changes in the structure and functioning of the socialist system of farming.

The brigade-team problem has been a controversial political and ideological issue since collectivization. It created schisms within the party leadership and brought about the purge of a leading Politburo member and his supporters.⁵ Khrushchev's attitude was ambivalent but toward the end of his career he leaned toward the team model. The new leadership has been non-committal. Their hand will be forced, however, at the upcoming All-Union Kolkhoz Congress. The Congress, originally scheduled for this year but likely to be postponed until 1967, will lay down guidelines for the revision of the Kolkhoz Charter. This statute governs the organization and operation of the collective farms. The two issues of elemental significance in the future development of the cooperative farms are: 1) Creation of kolkhoz unions, and 2) Organization of kolkhoz labor units: retention of the brigade or adoption of the smaller zveno.

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- 5) A.A. Andreev, the leading agricultural authority in the Stalin era. He championed the team system and fell from Stalin's graces in 1950. In 1952 at the Party Congress he was dropped from the Presidium.