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Office of the Policy Advisor  
Background Information USSR

22 August 1959

EXIT SOVIET CITY FARMER (III)

The series of recent decrees by various Soviet republics prohibiting the ownership of privately owned livestock by city residents are an object demonstration of the zig-zag technique the Soviet hierarchy resorts to in the process of implementing sharp changes in State policy to achieve a pre-determined goal. The sudden reversals stand out as general operating procedures for the satellite countries and a clear warning to their citizenry who may be affected.

The drastic prohibition against owning of livestock in the cities becomes more meaningful when viewed in the perspective of some slices of Soviet economic development. It was long customary among many workers and employees in the cities to keep private livestock in an effort to stretch out incomes and improve their levels of living. Small animals, poultry and rabbits, as well as large beasts were widely distributed. Even in the collectivization period, city owners were not molested; unlike the kolhoz-niki they were not required to pay monetary taxes on the stock nor make obligatory deliveries of livestock products. Only the keeping of draft animals was subject to certain levies. The output of these atomistic economies yielded a vital part of the urban diet during the difficult war and post-war periods. In fact, at the historic September plenum (1953), in promulgating the agrarian reforms, Khrushchev made a direct appeal to the city masses for help in solving the livestock problem:

"It is necessary to dispel the prejudice that it is disparaging for our industrial worker or office employee to have livestock in his personal possession."<sup>1</sup>

With such encouragement the private enterprise sector expanded and the national livestock count began a steady growth. Unfortunately, the actual contribution in product by the city livestock owners cannot be documented as Soviet statistical sources list only the numerical counts under various ownership.<sup>2</sup> While cattle and sheep numbers rose moderately, hogs increased 2 1/2 times.<sup>3</sup> This growth rate would also apply to poultry, another rapid growth species, but this too cannot be documented as the Soviets have never published a breakdown of poultry ownership for the precise reason that the vast majority of poultry is privately

<sup>1</sup>Pravda, 15 September 1953.

<sup>2</sup>City livestock counts are not comparable with rural numbers as indicators of output, as less units are kept for replacement and breeding, so the urban ratio of products would be proportionally higher.

<sup>3</sup>Chislennost skota v SSSR, p. 214.

owned. That the private sector undeniably prospered under the relaxed policy of the 1953 decrees becomes readily apparent from the precipitous volt-face policy in July 1956.

Under the guise "to combat the squandering of State grain and food products as livestock feed", the Council of Ministers banned the sale of grain and bread products for livestock feeding. In addition, city owners were forced to pay taxes and turn over a share of the products as obligatory deliveries to the State. City health authorities were authorized to ban livestock from populated centers for sanitary reasons.<sup>4</sup> The law charged that low feed prices in State shops created unusual demand for livestock feeding purposes and permitted the owners to sell products on the open market at high prices. "Speculative elements have ceased to engage in productive work in industry...while in reality engaged in stockbreeding...(which) corrupts the unstable section of the population and gives rise to elements of disorganization." So in one stroke 6 million urban producer units were deprived of essential feed resources and made to shift for themselves. By October 1956, the count of all livestock was well below previous levels.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly supplies of livestock products diminished on the city markets, free market prices firmed, and millions of urban consumers felt the restrictions in their budgets and diets.

Then a year later the pendulum swerved sharply to the right, almost to a Bukharin angle. At a moment when Khrushchev was fighting for his political life within the Presidium, he pre-announced a CC discussion to abolish all compulsory deliveries of farm products from the private herds and plots of city owners and collective farms.<sup>6</sup> This, he admitted, "would create a better political atmosphere in the village" and spark incentives to surpass the USA in the per capita output of meat, milk and butter. The decree was not formalized until the anti-Party group had been routed at an emergency CC session in June, and finally published 4 July 1957. It is tactically meaningful to note that the timing on this series of decrees (and subsequent ones) on private plots was made in summer - apparently a standing operating procedure - after the seeding was completed and before the harvest began, so as not to upset peasant attitudes and work patterns. Lifting of the obligatory deliveries from the private plots proved a popular and effective measure among producers and consumers, especially in the poor harvest year of 1957, but its very success prompted the present ban on livestock keeping in the cities. For as the tiny livestock units flourished in supplying the demand of the cities, the owners inferentially admitted they still had access to feed supplies and were able to negate the strictures of the 1956 decree.

<sup>4</sup> Pravda, 29 June, 27 August 1956.

<sup>5</sup> Hogs fell to 2.4 million head in 1956 vs. 3.2 in 1955; sheep 2.5 vs. 2.7; all cattle 2.2 vs. 2.4 million (supra).

<sup>6</sup> Izvestia, 24 May 1957.



Few more eloquent testimonials toward the little worm of private enterprise have yet been recorded in the Soviet Union. For in the final analysis there would never have been an urban private livestock industry had the State been able to supply the aggregate demand of consumers for meat, eggs and milk.

Ever on the alert to attack opposition targets, Khrushchev first lined the city farmers in the sight of his power gun at the December (1958) CC plenum to make them a national issue. At the subsequent June CC session, he sounded the death-knell of the 6 million city entrepreneurs:

"The keeping of livestock by some townspeople develops unhealthy speculative tendencies. Facts show that livestock is being kept not by those with low incomes but by people who already have quite a good income but who want to acquire more...they are feeding livestock at the expense of cheap state feed and are gaining profit thereby...This is being done by many townspeople.

"One should either raise bread prices or lower meat prices. Or else one should do away with the keeping of cattle by townspeople...We cannot raise bread prices - it would be politically wrong - likewise we cannot lower meat prices as meat production is still expensive. Should we not consider prohibiting the ownership of livestock by city dwellers?" (Pravda, 4 July 1959)

The decrees of seven republics and numerous large cities followed in rapid order. In due time, the twilight of the small livestock holdings throughout the Soviet Union will be officially acknowledged.

The restrictive decrees will undoubtedly be unpopular. It affects directly over 6 million producer families, many strategically clustered in industrial and commercial cities, all having sales access to kolkhoz or private marketing channels. Millions of city consumers, a vocal lot, will be heard in the market places. As Khrushchev admitted that State meat supplies were still inadequate to meet all urban demands, it seems unlikely that prices and supply responses will not be against consumer interests. Motives must have been compelling for the Kremlin leaders to institute such an unpopular policy, even as a short-run expedient, in the vital urban centers. Perhaps to husband and control grain stocks may have been primary, but that admits to a continuing grain shortage. As family budgetary studies among city residents show from 60 to 69 percent of total income spent on foodstuffs,<sup>7</sup> the motive why 6 million urbanites, on the other hand, keep livestock is readily apparent. How these

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<sup>7</sup> Background Information, "Soviet Family Living Levels (III)", 7 August 1959.

people will supplement their modest dietary and budgetary levels while dispossessed of their livestock remains their personal problem. But to be dispossessed of their holdings, by a process of forced sale to State agencies, is reminiscent of the collectivization drive against man and beast in the early 'thirties. As long as State sources cannot supply in full the livestock food requirements of urban consumers, the current restrictive measures against city farmers must be viewed in the same context as the collectivization campaign. It is a smoke signal to the collective farmers as well that their own private herds, too are on the agenda for liquidation in the not distant future.<sup>8</sup> But from the countryside the opposition will be more decisive.

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<sup>8</sup> State farm workers have already been ordered to dispose of all their privately owned livestock in one to two years time.