

MUNICH, 4 December 1969 (CAA Department) The following is a Radio Liberty Research item by Keith Bush.

After an interval of 34 years since the second congress, after nearly a generation since its convocation was first mooted, after four years of general, albeit spasmodic, discussion, concerning its principal function and after a reportedly intense debate in which participated "tens of millions of people" (Polyansky), nay "all toilers of the Soviet Union" (Podgorny), nay "all Soviet people" (Brezhnev), the Third All-Union Congress of Kolkhozniiks was finally held in Moscow on November 25 through 27, 1969. To say that it was a waste of time would be unkind and probably inaccurate: the 4,521 horny-handed sons and daughters of the soil who participated certainly appreciated the honor of being chosen as delegates and undoubtedly welcomed the opportunity to do some shopping in Moscow. Moreover, it is wholly possible that valuable work was performed behind the scenes in committee. But to judge solely from the overt evidence available, i.e., from the published proceedings of the congress,¹ and from the monitoring reports of Radio Moscow-1's direct transmissions from the Kremlin Palace, the concrete results of all the aforementioned activity would seem to be the approval of the draft model statute published in April 1969 with only one significant amendment, namely the provision of better social security cover for kolkhozniiks. In addition, the congress decreed the setting up of kolkhoz councils at the center, republics, krais, oblasts and raions.

Brezhnev's speech

The two principal speeches of the congress were made on the first day by Brezhnev and Polyansky. From their content and tone, it would appear that Polyansky has now assumed the role of the farm lobby's chief protagonist.

1. Pravda, November 26-28, 1969

Only a small portion of Brezhnev's homily was addressed to the draft statute and proposed amendments to it. The excesses of collectivization, which led to the deaths of millions of peasants and their families and to the decimation of the livestock sector, were dismissed with "in the process of kolkhoz construction, we did not avoid certain errors. But these were errors of seeking, errors from the lack of experience." Thereafter his emphasis was upon what industry and the working class had done for the peasant, with no acknowledgement of the peasant's tribute (dan) which financed Soviet industrialization. No reference was made to the increasingly pragmatic Soviet appraisals of this period which have been promulgated since Stalin's death.

That Brezhnev even bothered to take issue with internal and external detractors of the kolkhoz system - the latter labelled "bourgeois politicians and pseudo-theoreticians" - may be in part attributable to this year's poor showing in agriculture. In a typically roundabout way, Brezhnev implied that the gross agricultural product in 1969 will be some 5 per cent down on the 1968 level. If this is so, it will mean that 1969's agricultural product is the lowest since 1965 and that the target for the Eighth Five-Year Plan period (1966-70) of an average annual increase of 25 per cent over the 1961-65 period is hopelessly out of reach. The actual increase achieved during the first four years of current plan period would be 18 per cent. With a little more cooperation from the elements, an increase of at least 10 per cent next year is in the realms of possibility, but this would bring the five-year average up to 20 per cent above the 1961-65 average level. This is to be set against an anticipated increase of 60-65 per cent in agricultural investment.

It is true that the winter of 1968/69 was the worst for many years throughout several important agricultural regions. But the massive inputs of machinery and equipment, fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides, irrigation and drainage systems, should all by now be at least partly reflected by more stable and steadily increasing yields. Brezhnev has now delivered three major published speeches on agricultural policy - at the March 1969 and October 1968 plena and at this congress. The

2. He said: "The production and purchases of the main agricultural products will be roughly at the level of the annual average volume of the past four years." The value of the gross agricultural product has been: 1965 - 70.9, 1966 - 77.0, 1967 - 78.1, and 1968 - 80.9 billion rubles (in constant prices of 1965), suggesting a GAP for 1969 of about 76.7 billion rubles.

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two latter pronouncements have evidenced a less vigorous championship of, and an increasing disassociation from, the agricultural cause. This is possibly regrettable but wholly understandable. Since their first year of office, when economic necessity, popular demands and possibly reforming zeal, combined to motivate Khrushchev's successors into announcing two major economic reform programs, the subsequent record has been largely one of lack of drive in the face of bureaucratic and institutional inertia. After the impressive program of reforms unveiled at the March 1965 plenum, which aimed at improving the existing system of agricultural planning, management and incentives, while not changing its basic structure, Brezhnev has evidently come to realize that socialized agriculture in its present Soviet form is indeed a hopeless slough of despond. Under present conditions and constraints, agriculture is a no-win game for any politician. Without radical restructuring, it will continue to act as a brake upon overall economic development, but Brezhnev is not the man for proposing or implementing a radical restructure. It would be only human for him, and especially since agriculture more than any other single factor was responsible for the downfall of his predecessor, to want to write off agriculture as a lost cause and to seek to abdicate from the leadership of the farm lobby in favor of Polyansky.

As General Secretary of the CPSU, Brezhnev nevertheless appropriated the few plums which were to be thrown to the assembled kolkhozniks. An irrigation scheme is to be initiated in the vast wheat plains of the Volga region; this should make for stable yields, even if the resultant real production costs may come to three or four times the current level on the world markets at the official rate of exchange. The construction will shortly commence of a new truck plant, although the products will be for general and not specifically for agricultural use. Undoubtedly the most popular announcement was the forthcoming inclusion of kolkhozniks in a centralized social security scheme, with benefits presumably on or near the level of those enjoyed by workers and employees. Finally, Brezhnev proposed - clearly with some assurance that his proposal would be adopted - the creation of a system of elected kolkhos councils (sovety kolkhov) at all levels. It remains to be seen what precise functions will be fulfilled by these councils, but their name alone would suggest that they will be merely advisory bodies rather than organs with executive power to safeguard the interests of kolkhozes and kolkhozniks as has so often been demanded by countless letters and articles during the debate on the new statute.

The rest of Brezhnev's speech was devoted to a review of the agricultural sector and the tasks confronting it, which differed little from his appraisal at the October 1968 plenum, followed by remarks on Soviet foreign policy. The most lagging branch of Soviet agriculture is the livestock sector; despite a price support bill currently running at about six billion rubles a year, retail prices are high for poor quality meat, yet livestock raising remains unprofitable for many farms and thus output is

stagnant if not declining. Brezhnev implied that this problem would be discussed at a forthcoming Central Committee plenum.

Polyansky's speech

There is some evidence to suggest that Polyansky entered the lists as the principal champion of the kolkhozniks' interests but that he did not acquit himself very well and retired limping. It was left to him to deal with the substance of the congress' agenda. In addition to seconding Brezhnev's call for a system of kolkhoz councils and to detailing the extension of social security benefits to the kolkhoz population, Polyansky listed some of the more meaningful and positive suggestions which had been aired during the four years' debate on the model charter. These included the election of brigade and sub-unit leadership, the possibility of a secret ballot for kolkhoz chairmen, the development of rural trade, the eligibility of a wider circle of kolkhozniks for trade union membership, and the fixing of pay scales for kolkhoz officials. Although he subsequently dismissed most of these as being too complicated and detailed for inclusion in the new charter, the mere fact that he enumerated these recommendations would imply that he supported them to a certain extent.

On this occasion, it was Polyansky and not Brezhnev who termed the creation of a highly developed agriculture a "common task for the entire people" (obshchenarodnaya zadacha) and called upon the participation of all Soviet people in speeding up the development of kolkhoz-sovkhoz production. By this he meant that aid from the rest of the community and from the other branches of the economy was needed to help bridge the still vast gulf between urban and rural living standards and to assist in raising the admittedly low labor and capital productivity of this lagging branch of the economy. Although Brezhnev had called agricultural development an "obshchenarodnaya" task at both the March 1965 and October 1968 plena, he declined to use this formulation before the kolkhozniks. Instead, he made it plain that any improvement of rural living standards was henceforth to be financed solely by those living in the country.

However, and intriguing although still tenuous piece of circumstantial evidence suggests that Polyansky may have been thwarted or frustrated by other elements over the course of events which he expected - or wanted - to develop. The radio schedule made provision for the congress to last until Friday, November 28, and at congresses like this when the speakers are carefully selected and told what to say, the organizers have a pretty good idea of how long the proceedings will last. But on Thursday at 1718 hrs local time, Radio Moscow-1 reported Podgorny (who was in the chair) as saying that it had been proposed to shorten the discussion of the draft statute. 141 people had been put down to speak, of which 49 had spoken. The suggestion to terminate the debate was carried unanimously. Then came the following passage:

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Podgorny: "Comrade Polyansky ...will not give the closing speech."

Voices from the hall: indistinct

Podgorny: "No, he has not refused [or conceded]. It's just that he will not be here. (Net, ne otkazalsya. Prosto ne budet!)"

After two further routine speeches, Podgorny then closed the congress. Whether or not the above is significant must be left to conjecture, but such incidents are rare at well-ordered Soviet congresses.

Most of Polyansky's further remarks were devoted to a restatement of his views on agricultural policy in line with his famous article in Kommunist (No. 15, 1967, pp. 15-31), and to some important observations on what should not, in his opinion, be included in the new model charter. He voiced warm support for inter-kolkhoz and state kolkhoz agricultural processing, equipment and repair associations. The joint nature of this type of combine or association both facilitates the eventual transformation of kolkhoz property into public property as well as making it easier for the state to control its operations and thus to prevent the sort of large-scale private initiative which has been pilloried in the recent past. On the other hand, small-scale kolkhoz ancillary or auxiliary enterprises are to be further encouraged; these offer employment during the slack season (the average number of work-days put in by kolkhozniks in the RSFSR in 1967 was 234³ including Saturdays and Sundays during the peak season), they provide additional income for the kolkhoz and kolkhozniks and they often utilize much produce which might otherwise perish due to inadequate or inefficient marketing procedures.

Polyansky's proposal to drop the alternative title of "agricultural artel" may be interpreted as a further step towards the "socialization" of kolkhoz property, yet it can also be construed simply as a rational and overdue recognition of the obsolescence of the term artel which is hardly applicable to today's giant kolkhozes.

Once again Polyansky affirmed that the private sector is to be tolerated for the foreseeable future, with the traditional formulation: "The time will come when the public sector will reach such a level that the kolkhozniks themselves will give up their plots and livestock holdings as uneconomic and unnecessary."

3. Sovetskie profsoyuzy, No. 18, 1968, p. 27

But unjustifiably to curtail the private sector, artificially to expedite the process at the present would mean not facing the realities of life in the country." Similarly, he rejected moves towards controlling trade on the kolkhoz market. This is to be welcomed, although it should be pointed out in this context that maximum prices (twice the going state retail store prices) have been established since early this summer on the Moscow kolkhoz markets.⁴

Other welcome decisions announced by Polyansky included the rejection of proposals to set down in the model statute the shares of a kolkhoz's gross income to be allocated to consumption and to accumulation, as well as proposals to prescribe standard all-union minima for labor participation in the public sector. Undaunted, a formidable kolkhoz chairwoman (madame chairman?) from Turkestan proposed that the charter specify that any member who did not work in the public sector could be deprived of his private plot. Incidentally, hers was the sole proposed amendment to the charter emanating from a delegate to be carried in the press or monitored radio reports.

The single most meaningful advance announced at the congress was the introduction of a unified social security system for kolkhozniks. This is in addition to the all-union pension scheme for kolkhozniks instituted in 1964 to which kolkhozes at present pay 4 per cent of their gross income and to which the state adds a further substantial contribution (approximately 1.1 billion rubles in 1968⁵). Hopefully, kolkhozniks will henceforth receive the same level of sickness benefits, provision of sanatoria, maternity pay, etc. as workers and employees, although the revised regulations for maternity leave and allowances for female kolkhozniks which were published earlier this year⁶ are distinctly less liberal than those announced five years ago.

Kolkhozes are to pay into the centralized social security fund 2.4 per cent of their payrolls, equivalent to roughly 1.5 per cent of their gross income. Thus the sum of kolkhozes' contributions to the centralized pension and social security funds will amount to about 8.8 per cent of their payrolls; this compares with a combined deduction for industrial enterprises which ranges from 3.7 to 10.7 per cent according to the working conditions of their parent industry.⁷

4. This was first reported by Handelsblatt, June 19, 1969 and confirmed by Sovetskaya Rossiya, August 5, 1969. That the administrative setting of prices on the kolkhoz markets is forbidden, was restated by the RSFSR Deputy Minister of Trade in Sovetskaya Rossiya, May 13, 1965.

5. Narkhoz 68, p. 778

6. Ekonomicheskaya gazeta, No. 35, 1969, p. 15

7. A. M. Aleksandrov, Finansy i kredit, Moscow, 1948, p. 90

Appraisal

The Third All-Union Congress of Kolkhozniks can hardly be described as an historic turning point in the lives of the kolkhoz population of the USSR. It ratified a draft model charter which had taken cognizance of and codified the many improvements and changes in kolkhoz life and operation introduced since the death of Stalin, and especially in 1965. The only substantial amendment was the extension of a unified social security scheme for kolkhozniks. The other innovation at the congress was the implementation of Brezhnev's proposal to set up kolkhoz councils at all levels; to the present author's knowledge, this proposal had not once been aired in the public debate prior to the congress.

No radical new directions in agricultural policy were announced. As had been implied at the October 1968 plenum, the current system of stable, basic grain purchase targets and graduated purchase targets for meat and animal products will be maintained during the forthcoming Ninth Five-Year Plan period. Some new but limited initiative is to be expected in the livestock sector. The burden of bringing rural living standards closer to urban levels, as well as an increasing share of the heavy planned expenditure on land improvement schemes, will fall upon the rural population. Polyansky's exhortation concerning moral incentives may be taken as an indication that kolkhozniks' earnings from the public sector will not rise as rapidly in the future as they have in the period since the March 1965 plenum and in relation to urban earnings.

Just a few of the proposals for improving the model statute or to correct shortcomings in kolkhoz management which were aired in the Soviet press but which were not treated at the congress might be mentioned here. The very existence of a model kolkhoz charter which seeks to prescribe a pattern or code of operation, membership, labor discipline, leisure activities, pension rights, sickness benefits and so on for a specific section of the population which differs substantially from the provisions of the constitution which apply to the rest of the population represents de jure and de facto discrimination against that specific group of people.

It would be naive to presume that the mere recording of rights, privileges and safeguards in an official document would guarantee that these would be respected and observed. As the late Iosip Vissarionovich so rightly remarked: "Paper will put up with anything that is written on it," and, as is well known, the Soviet Constitution is the most liberal of all on paper. But at least the record could serve in any struggle for the recognition and extension of these rights and privileges.

What the model charter, as drafted and as now passed, lacks above all are meaningful safeguards for the kolkhoznik. There is, for instance, no guarantee that he may leave the kolkhoz whenever he so desires - merely a stipulation that the kolkhoz board is obliged to consider his application to leave

within the space of three months. The charter provides for guaranteed pay, but does not spell out how much; surely it should here include the qualification "guaranteed pay (in cash and kind) based upon the tariff rates of the corresponding categories of sovkhos workers and employees" which was promised in 1966.⁸ Why not, for that matter, extend the all-union minimum wage of 60 rubles a month to kolkhozniiks? Similarly, a kolkhozniik "has the right to receive work in public economy of the kolkhoz..." but there is no stipulation as to how much work or when this is to be provided. The kolkhoz is adjured to assist kolkhozniiks in tending their private plots and livestock holdings, but the extent of assistance will in practice vary with the whim of the kolkhoz chairman or brigadier. And so on, throughout the charter. Of course, individual kolkhoz charters may provide more protection for their members than the model statute, although this is unlikely.

Both key speakers at the congress made it clear that the new model statute is supposed to last until the material-technical basis of the communist society is constructed. Probably it will, for the decision-makers in Moscow would doubtless wish to let a decade or two pass before going through all that business over again. But since the attainment of that material-technical basis (the quantitative goals set out in the Party Program called for a Soviet living standard in 1980+ about on a par with the US level of the early 1960s - without private cars!) is still to a large extent dependant upon the performance of the agricultural sector, many substantial de facto changes in kolkhoz operation and life will be required regardless of whether these will be reflected in the model statute.

8. Pravda, May 18, 1966