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SETBACK FOR SOVIET WINTER CROPS

Summary: Extreme cold and the lack of a protective snow cover have caused extensive damage to the winter wheat crop in the fertile southern granaries in the Soviet Union. The extent of the damage is a top-level secret, but two important meetings on agriculture with party and state officials chaired by Brezhnev were held recently. While it is too early to predict with precision the size of the losses, it appears fairly certain that a major setback has been dealt the grain-livestock sector of the Soviet economy. Past performances would indicate a 20 million ton shortage from the following year's harvest and will either restrict Soviet grain exports or force larger grain imports.

Excessively cold weather and the absence of a snow cover to protect fall sown grains threaten large areas of seedings in the winter wheat heartland of the Soviet Union. Scattered reports of unfavorable weather conditions had appeared during the winter, but it was not until an official meteorological report was released in early February that the serious nature of the current cropping conditions was generally recognized. Since then grave references have appeared in the press.

The USSR hydrometeorological center reported on conditions in the winter wheat belt for the end of January as follows:

Due to heavy frosts and lack of snow in the Central Black Earth belt, the Ukraine and the north Caucasus, the soil froze to a depth of 100-150 cm., which has happened only once before in the last 25 years -- in 1969. Conditions are bad for winter crops and perennial grasses, and damage will result to grain crops. . . .The heavy frosts have also damaged fruit trees and berry bushes. . .clover and alfalfa plantations. (1)

As wheat accounts for over 90 per cent of the Soviet cereal crop, and winter wheat for about 40 per cent of the total wheat harvest, it is evident that the threatened winter-kill is of grave economic significance. Winter wheat is of higher quality and a heavier yielder than spring wheat. A comparison between the two in a good year and a poor year is made as follows: (2)

	<u>Winter-Spring Wheat: USSR</u>			
	<u>Winter Wheat</u>		<u>Spring Wheat</u>	
	<u>1969</u>	<u>1970</u>	<u>1969</u>	<u>1970</u>
Area planted (mil. hec.)	14.4	18.7	52.0	46.7
Total yield, (mil. tons)	27.4	42.0	52.1	56.4
Yields quintals/hec.	18.9	22.8	10.1	12.3

Winter wheat almost doubles the yield of spring wheat, requires less inputs per unit of output, and is a more profitable crop. It occupies the best growing region in the USSR and competes with the profitable industrial crops -- sugar beets and sunflowers-- for the best land. The winter wheat belt is concentrated in southern and southeastern Russia, where weather conditions are generally more stable than in the spring wheat areas located in the northern and drier eastern regions.

In the fertile Voronezh oblast, heavy damage to winter grains is expected. A report describes the situation as a "great misfortune." Reseeding the lost areas will require double the amount of field work, labor, machinery, and seed. (3) From the area with the highest yields and most efficient farms, the Kuban, where 40 per cent of the sown area is in grain, reports mention the deep concern farm workers are expressing over the state of the seedlings because of extreme weather. (4) Shifts from small grains to corn are being considered. In the southern Ukraine, Nikolaevsk oblast, which fielded a record yield of 37 quintals per hectare last year, now claims a spotty pattern of winter-killing on its three million hectares. Officials have decided that in areas where more than 40 per cent of the plants are dead from freezing, reseeded with spring crops will have to take place. (5) This statement is revealing in that a half crop of winter wheat is considered more certain and secure than planting spring grains under the dry summer conditions of the Ukraine. Coming from an oblast which broke all Ukrainian records in the volume of grain deliveries to the state last year (nearly two million tons), it illustrates the risks and uncertainties of grain growing in one of the most fertile areas in the Soviet Union.

Hard upon such factual reports from the provinces, Pravda printed a feature editorial calling for an all-out effort to organize planting operations to assure high yields this year. The opening paragraph cautioned against optimism:

The severe January frosts have damaged winter grains in some areas and it will be necessary to replant [a part of the area]. (6)

The same issue carried a report on a February 17 meeting of Politburo members with party and government leaders from the union-republics to discuss "preparations for carrying out the spring field work and the further development in livestock production." Secretary-General Brezhnev spoke to the gathering but details of his remarks were not printed. Such meetings with party and state leaders have been held in late winter for the past few years as a means for the leadership to evince their concern about the development of agriculture. Now, however, an entirely new emphasis has been given to these scheduled gatherings. A second meeting, dealing with the same issues, was held for the benefit of party and state officials at oblast and territorial levels in the Russian Federation. The official announcement said the meeting heard provincial officials' reports on the preparations for spring sowing and livestock production. (7) Secretary-General Brezhnev

delivered a speech, but no details were given. It is safe to speculate that this unusual set of meetings with upper and middle level officials underscores the gravity and urgency of the spring crop sowing in view of the winter-killing losses.

How large are the losses? Involved are fully 19 million hectares of winter wheat, about one million hectares of winter barley, and ten million hectares of winter rye. Almost all the rye in the northern and central zones has not been seriously affected by winter-killing. Thus the crux lies with winter wheat, all sown in contiguous regions. In the past, winter losses varied from 3 to 14 million hectares of all grains. The regime always remained silent on the extent of the losses until long after the event. There is not now sufficient evidence from the provinces to arrive at a precise estimate. But given the uniformity of the known degree of losses in the strategic grain regions and the evident party concern, it is apparent that losses are serious. In the last two setbacks caused by winter-killing during 1967 and 1969, about 22 million tons of grain were lost each year compared with the normal crop years that followed. To be sure, there is no complete loss from the affected areas as they will be replanted with spring grains (wheat, barley, corn, oats), but the difference in yield is considerable. And the areas weakened by losses but not replanted will yield a reduced harvest, though one still worth harvesting. Thus, to speak in terms of millions of hectares replanted, or damaged to a degree but not replanted, is rather imprecise. Under such considerations, more than ten million hectares, or about half, are no doubt affected. Winter-kill damages, like gold reserves, are highly classified subjects in the Kremlin's judgement.

At this early stage in the cropping season, it is fairly certain there will be a shortfall in the Soviet grain harvest this year. Only exceptionally favorable weather could help the spring crops overcome the winter damage. But it must be kept in mind that the absence of snow covering means reduced soil moisture, and as drought conditions are normal during the summer growing period in the winter and spring wheat belts, it follows that the cropping prospects for a good harvest are severely limited.

The current plan calls for an average annual output of 195 million tons. Last year it was 14 million tons short of the target. If the previous winter-kill years' losses are used as a guide, the 1972 grain harvest may well be on the order of 170-175 million tons -- a serious setback for

the lagging agricultural sector of the economy. Such a loss would have a decisive impact on the favored livestock industry where feed-grain shortages have chronically restricted output. Even with last year's relatively good grain harvest, the Soviet Union purchased three million tons of feed grains from the United States for 136 million dollars in order to expand its livestock industry. Moreover, the Soviet export trade in grain, between 5-1/2 to 7 million tons yearly, would have to be cut back in the face of such losses: either exports would have to be slashed or imports raised to make up for the loss. It is apparent that the grain problem has yet to be solved.

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(Footnotes)

- (1) Selskaya zhizn, 4 February 1972. Radio Moscow home service, 5 February 1972.
- (2) SSSR v tsifrakh, 1970, pp. 107-110.
- (3) Selskaya zhizn, 18 February 1972.
- (4) Ibid., 20 February 1972.
- (5) Ibid., 21 February 1972.
- (6) Pravda, 18 February 1972.
- (7) Reuter, 24 February 1972.