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Munich, 14 March 1963 (Non-Target Communist Area Analysis
Department: USSR - cz)

In his first speech since being appointed on March 8, the new Soviet Minister of Agriculture, Ivan P. Volovchenko, faithfully followed the Khrushchevian furrows on current farming. As the primary measure to increase grain yields, he advocated autumn plowing instead of spring plowing -- a policy which the First Secretary has been advancing since he ordered the plowing up of grasslands over a year ago. The minister's other proposals were also hardly original: the improvement of seed stock, application of more fertilizers, and more effective exploitation of scientific achievements. He showed himself to be a confirmed anti-grasslander, citing results he had achieved on the state farm he had been managing since 1951 (Pravda, Izvestia, 13 March).

The two-day conference for party secretaries and chairmen of Production Administrations from the territories and autonomous republics of the Russian Federation, was attended by virtually all the members of the Presidium and the secretaries of the CC, CPSU. It was chaired by L. N. Efremov, First Deputy Chairman of the Buro of the CC, CPSU, for the RSFSR. The Russian Federation accounts for over half of the total agricultural output of the Soviet Union, and last year, with the poor crop in the Kazakhstan Virgin Lands, the RSFSR supplied 64 percent of the national marketable grain stocks.

Efremov, Presidium candidate member, may well have replaced G. I. Voronov, full member of the Presidium and Chairman of the RSFSR Council of Ministers, as the Federation's spokesman on agriculture -- or at least his status within the party hierarchy has been enhanced with the publication of his keynote speech, while Voronov, an agricultural expert in his own right, was not even given the floor. Efremov reported that the grain area in the RSFSR is to be expanded this year by 10 million hectares, thus reaching 89.5 million hectares in all. (The 1962 USSR total was 139.5 million hectares.) The continued plowing up of grasslands will provide 4 million additional hectares; one million hectares of new lands are to be plowed up, and the balance is to be cut from "low-yielding" grain crops such as oats and rye.

He also revealed that the fall-sown grain area reached 28 million hectares last year, an increase of 15 percent; corn silage yield was disappointing and many regions are short of livestock feed; and in the reorganization of agriculture, the Federation has set up since November, 795 Production Directorates (784 with party organizations) in place of 1,867 rural raikoms (Pravda, 12 March).

The report of the Volgograd obkom secretary not only confirmed the trend toward fall plowing but also to fall seeding of grain. The lower Volga area, after suffering two crop reverses, came through with a record harvest last year because of unusually favorable weather conditions. Under such conditions, any cropping practice will yield good results. However, a sudden and massive shift to fall plowing and sowing of small grains is a hazardous undertaking: without adequate snow cover, wind erosion and subsequent moisture losses will deplete the natural fertility of the soil, as has been so strikingly demonstrated in the declining yields of the Kazakh Virgin Lands. It is with this crucial problem that the new Minister of Agriculture and his scientists should be concerning themselves. Fall plowing is no cure-all.

To wind up the conference, which seems to have replaced a CC special plenum on agriculture this winter, Khrushchev delivered a "big speech which was enthusiastically received by the delegates." An analysis of this will appear tomorrow.

tk/2039