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WHERE, OH WHERE, ARE THE SPARES?

The need for spare parts for tractors, trucks, and farm machinery assumes huge proportions in the Soviet Union at this time of year -- the eve of the spring planting season. For the next six months "alarming signals" will be heard from the countryside which will reverberate in the press with force and fury. Almost every newspaper will carry the familiar accounts of tractors standing idle because of the shortage of spares, combines unrepaired, and the overall machinery repair plan for the oblast or farm unfulfilled by \_\_\_ percent.

The scope of the tractor repair problem is enormous -- over 600 million rubles a year are expended by the farms to keep their power units in a modicum of working order, as Soviet agriculture is equipped with only half the power it needs. Thus, tractors are over-loaded, break down frequently, and are discarded after about seven years. The amount of spare parts needed in this repair work would equip 180,000 new tractors. (In 1962, 287,000 units of all sizes were produced, of which only 72 percent were allocated to agriculture.) The cost of a capital repair job on tractors and trucks exceeds the cost of a new machine, while the operational period of a repaired machine is 2 to 3 times shorter than that of a new model.<sup>1</sup>

In the past the main weapon employed by the party to increase repairs was a mass campaign exhorting and mobilizing mechanizers and farm officials to overcome the "break": the spares shortage was generally played down. This year, however, a wholly new dynamic has been brought into the farms' repair shops. The recently organized Party-State Control Committee of the CC CPSU and USSR Council of Ministers has been ordered to conduct a thorough check-up during February and March of the state of machinery repairs on every state and collective farm in the Soviet Union. Two successive editorials in Pravda (23, 25 February 1963) laid down the guide lines for the organization of the check-up. Shelepin's massive control apparatus will reach into every rural habitation where there is a machinery

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph is based on a study in Pravda, 6 October 1961. The Soviet Union had 1,100,000 tractors in 1961 compared to 4,900,000 for the U.S.

park.<sup>2</sup> Their task is to verify that every farm is so organized that each piece of farm machinery is in optimum working order for spring planting and subsequent harvesting.

Repair campaigns have been chronic since collectivization, and their origins lie deep within the centralized bureaucracy of the Soviet system. For if a given machine can be manufactured at all, it stands to reason that in any rationally functioning economic order, its component parts could be reproduced and distributed. But as Soviet agriculture broadens its base of mechanization, the problem of lack of spares, unrepaired field equipment, and shortages of mechanizers seems to become more acute and insoluble than before.

When the equipment of the Machine Tractor Stations was sold to the collective farms in 1958, the decree of the Central Committee placed special stress on the normalization of the output of spare parts. For example, only the Minister of Agriculture, upon recommendation, if need be, of the Union Republic first secretaries of the CP, could order the stoppage of production of any item of parts. At present, presumably the head of the Selkhoztekhnika<sup>3</sup> has this optional power.

How can this chronic state of backwardness be accounted for? One factor is the failure, 45 years after the revolution, to standardize machinery products and components and thereby eliminate wasteful duplication. However, the Soviet tractor industry has 30 separate organizations designing new tractors, while the USA, by comparison, has at best six firms engaged in drawing up improvements in tractor design. In the spare parts industry there is a veritable jungle of producers, many duplicating the work of other plants. During January 1963, in tractor parts alone there were 250 enterprises in the Soviet Union making component parts; of these, only 118 plants fulfilled the monthly (January) plans.<sup>4</sup> The large number of factories producing tractor spares is a surprising revelation which may represent a seasonal count at the time of peak demand;

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<sup>2</sup> The most complete report to date comes from Uzbekistan, where the local committee of the Party-State Control Agency "assisted by volunteer workers" checked on the repair progress of the farms of a Production Directorate and warned the chairman, inspector-organizer, party organizer, and secretary of the party committee that if within a month's time the "serious lag" had not been corrected, they would be subjected to "strict and severe punishment." The committee would return within a month to verify the repairs on the farms, but the responsibility would rest with the Directorate officials. (Pravda Vostoka, 24 February 1963).

<sup>3</sup> The All-Union Agency for the distribution of tractors, machinery, fuel, fertilizers, supplies.

<sup>4</sup> Selskaya zhizn, 24 February 1963.



however, their numbers substantiate the charge that the industry is fragmentized and lacks a policy for the standardization of parts. The reports in the Soviet press criticizing shortages concentrate on individual plants which, for example, fulfill only "two out of 14" requisitioned parts and omit to mention the overall shortages in specific parts.<sup>5</sup> So it is more meaningful to select from the reports some large and well-known factory where the spares are indigenously produced and not supplied by subsidiary contractors. The famous Kharkhov tractor plant, for instance, is charged with a failure to produce in 1962 38,500 drive wheels for its popular tractor model, DT-54, which "immobilized 19,000 tractors -- almost a million hour-power fleet!"<sup>6</sup> With old model tractors the situation is even worse -- many plants under pressure to meet output quotas simply stop making parts for the old models which sets in motion a cycle of "cannibalizing" the existing model on the farms.<sup>7</sup>

Few foreigners, if any, have been allowed to look behind the scenes in the power struggle for ball bearings, gears, and sprockets. Now, a leading engineer has shed some light on the tangled problem in the pages of Selskaya zhizn (16 February 1963), where he recorded a recent visit to the office of the highest headquarters -- the All-Union office of Selkhoztekhnika in Moscow.

"The situation worsens. The telephone rings uninterruptedly; the Tselinnyi krai demands ball bearings; Siberia urges an increase in track rollers. And here is a telegram:

'Moscow, Selkhoztekhnika, Ezhevsky.<sup>8</sup> 4,770 tractors stand not repaired. This raises threat of a break in timely fulfillment of machine-tractor park for field work. Request you order Kharkov-Kursk tractor factories to resume output of spare parts... Chairman Selkhoztekhnika, Voronezh Oblast'

"The demands are many. Selkhoztekhnika, however, cannot satisfy them all.

"How was such a serious situation with spares allowed to develop? Is it possible that the work of such a vital sector of industry, on which depends the fate of the harvest, goes unplanned? We visited the chief of the tractor spares section and posed the question.

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5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 The new chairman appointed after the shake-up of the agency following the November 1962 plenum.

'Of course, the production is planned,' he replied. 'Norms of output of spares are worked out by the institutes, Gosplan, and by us, the Soyusselkhoztekhnika. Besides, we consider the requests and orders of the republics. Unfortunately, however, we have never once received a supply of spares to cover the demand. The All-Union Economic Council and its subsidiary, Soyuzavtoselmash, ruthlessly "cut" our requisition. And this is not all. Even the "slashed" plan is beyond the production capabilities of the industrial enterprises!'"<sup>9</sup>

Here lies open the heart of the matter. Cut-backs in requisitions for spare parts are initiated at the highest level -- the All-Union Economic Council and its subsidiary, Soyuzavtoselmash. Why? The director of a tractor plant provides an answer in his reply to the central authorities:

"Delete from our production plan the manufacture of ball bearings. We are unable to carry out the request as we lack 13 lathes, let alone the plant space if we could get the machines."'<sup>10</sup>

Essentially the crisis in spares rests on the recurrent shortages of resources and machines, and the problem of rationality in planning -- how best to solve the scarcity problem in the allocation of production factors.<sup>11</sup> Compared to the demands for capital resources in the more preferential sectors of the economy -- heavy industry, space, armaments -- spare parts for farm machinery are obviously of low priority. This deliberate misallocation of resources has been the main brake on the development of the Soviet farm machinery industry since collectivization. Just how Shelepin's army of inspectors of the Committee for Party-State Control can solve the spares problem is clearly within the realm of a Gogolian farce. No amount of exhortation, sloganeering, and checking the work roster can ever become a substitute for a sustained and complex supply of ball bearings, pistons, and the full galaxy of parts.

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<sup>9</sup> In the Altai territory with its integrated tractor and motors supply enterprises, the cut-backs are initiated by the Altai Sovnarkhoz, Selskaya zhizn charged. "Some sovnarkhozy look upon the production of spares as a subsidiary enterprise and concentrate their efforts on supplying only enough parts to outfit the new machines. They remain indifferent to the fact that the output of spares is an organic and vital component of the national economic plan." (Ibid. 13 January 1963)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The Lithuanian Council of Ministers decreed that no new spare parts would be sold to farms unless the worn-out parts were turned in, for which scrap metal prices would be paid. (Tiesa, 19 February 1963).