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PRIVATE PLOTS -- VITAL SOURCE OF IMPROVED RURAL LIVING LEVELS

Summary: Comprehensive data on family living budgets are hard to come by in the Soviet press. At best, sample budgets are presented and primarily designed to prove a certain policy. To most of the 44 percent of the population classed as rural, the present study of an elitist working family of two on a leading state farm is anything but representative. At that, the contribution of the private plot was decisive to the present rise in living standards -- providing the basic food for family consumption and supplying 25 percent of the cash income for family non-food outlays. No more convincing paean for the private sector could be formulated during the Brezhnev-Kosygin era.

Systematic data on family budgets are still of a restricted nature in the Soviet Union and their publication is highly selective. However, "sample" budgets are quite frequently cited in the press and the purpose of such practices is to prove certain policies; this in itself would indicate a counsel of caution in approach and a need for more tooled analysis.

A rather comprehensive budget for a "typical rural family" of four living on a state farm was submitted by a candidate for historical sciences, P. Shelest, writing in the official agricultural organ of the CC, CPSU.(1) It covered a full page. For an "average" rural family in the Kotelsky sovkhos, 120 kms. from Leningrad, the social scientist chose the Alexandrovs. Both man and wife are employed, earning about the same salary: he is a tractorist on a mechanized team growing potatoes and beets; the wife is a supervisor of the cattle breeding section. There are two young children in the family. The average monthly wages for both members of the family are 225 rubles, or 2,701 rubles' total for the year. Alexandrov is scarcely anything but representative of the sovkhos worker, as out of 9.4 million workers, 1.4 million are tractorists and mechanizers on the state farms, or only 15 percent of the total labor force.(2) Nor can the wife be considered an average woman worker, in her post as supervisor, as the vast majority of women do the "black work" on the farms.

The Alexandrov's income accounts are listed for 1969 compared to 1964 in the following schedule:

			Share of Income (%)	
	1964	1969	1964	1969
	(in rubles)			
Wages from farm	1,195	2,701	75	61.
Premiums	---	10	--	.02
Stay in Sanitorium	---	240	--	5.4
Grants	98	---	6.2	---
Other Income	25	14	1.6	0.3
Profit from sale of products from private plot	16	892	1.0	20.2
Cash on hand, withdrawals from savings account and repayment loans	256	569	16.1	12.9
Totals	1,590.	4,426.	100.0	100.0

(1) Selskaya zhizn, 24 May 1970.

(2) Narkhoz 1968, p. 454. About two-thirds of sovkhos labor is employed at manual work. Voprosy ekonomiki, 11, 1968, p. 41.

Assuming both man and wife worked full time both in 1964 as well as last year, the increase in joint wages showed a rise of 125 percent. The gross family income includes state payments for sanatorium, sale of products from the private plot, such dubious "income" credits as cash on hand, savings withdrawals, and repayment of debts, and some sources of indirect income which total 4,426 rubles, or 1,107 rubles per family members. The researcher drives home his main point at this juncture -- the base set for comparison preceded the March 1965 Plenum when the new Brezhnev-Kosygin agrarian policy was enacted.

Both the most surprising and surging sector of income was the private plot sector. Besides furnishing a good share of the food for the family of four, which the author does not evaluate in cash terms, the income from the sale of surplus products rose from 16 to 892 rubles. In fact, in terms of real cash income the net profits from the private plot accounted for 25 percent of the total in 1969. Four years ago they were almost nonexistent.(3) The researcher does a disservice to objectivity in that he omits to credit the private plot with the value of food consumed by the family, particularly so because he stresses the decline in the share of family income spent on food.

The distribution of family expenditures during 1969 compared to 1964 follows:

	1964	1969
Food	439	1,044
Commercial goods (clothing, furniture, supplies, equipment)	619	1,010
Non-commodity outlays	475	1,557
Savings	50	600
Cash on hand	7	215
Totals ...	1,590	4,426

- (3) In Western accounting practices, only the income from wages and net profit from the private plot sales would be considered as family income, or in the Alexandrov case 3,603 rubles instead of the given 4,426 rubles.

It is regrettable that a more complete breakdown of the first three items is not given, but it is apparent the quality of food consumed by the Alexandrovs has improved since 1964. Food outlays rose by 137 percent, reflecting greater disposable income and better supplies; with livestock products, however, retail prices rose by 30 to 60 percent in state shops since 1964, and still higher in the kolkhoz markets, which tend to inflate the rise. The study shows the share of gross income spent on food fell from 27.7% in 1964 to 23.6% in 1969. If, however, the value of produce from the private plot were included, the food share would be of the order of 40-50 percent, more in line with the industrial workers' budget.

The outlay for industrial goods, the only category where a breakdown is given, rose least with a 60 percent upturn. It includes clothing, shoes, household equipment, furnishings, sports and hygienic supplies. The head of the household does not own a motorcycle and his means of conveyance are by public carrier. It is unusual that among his "wishes" for the future there is no desire for an automobile.(4)

The item "non-commercial outlays," showing a 300 percent growth over 1964, is not itemized. Presumably it includes holidays, taxes, cultural, and social expenses. It covered 35 percent of the total family expenditures.

The rise of the specialists and mechanizers, particularly on the state farm, is clearly seen from the composition of the work force at this model farm. Out of "over one thousand families" there were 341 working specialists and 32 supervisory leaders with secondary and higher education on its rolls. Kotelsky sovkhoz is certainly an advanced farm, specializing in supplying vegetables, potatoes and livestock products to the Leningrad market. Among the social-cultural achievements of its over "one thousand families," 700 have radio reception, 528 TV sets, 196 home libraries, 343 participate in artistic pursuits, 458 occupy themselves with sports, but only 23 attend evening classes or study circles.

Despite the highly selective data on the "average sovkhoz working family," the study shows the progress achieved since the 1965 March plenum on redirection of agricultural policy. This was the author's objective. The Alexandrovs are anything but representative of the state farm worker, of which there are more than 9 million. They rather represent an average man-wife specialists' combination on an advanced state farm. The most

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persuasive single factor in the well-being of the family was the extraordinary rise in the receipts of products sold from the private plot. This substantial output was responsible for an improved diet for the family and the added cash income of 25 percent provided the increment to improve on the consumption of both industrial goods and non-commercial factors.

Despite the Kremlin's insistence on the eventual liquidation of the private sector as ideologically untenable and economically redundant, the private plot, as this advanced farm study illustrates, will remain a feature of socialized agriculture for a long time to come. They are the dynamic source for an improved level of living among the underemployed millions engaged in communist agriculture.

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