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BACKWARD BORDERLANDS (III)

Byelorussia is one of the Soviet republics with a unique distinction: it is a member of the United Nations. Compared to its UN co-equals in the logistics of economic and political power -- the USSR and the Ukraine -- any further favorable comparisons with these and other republics become academic. The deferential status accorded to border republics by the Kremlin, apart from military considerations, has not generally been the fortune of the White Russian republic. It has been one of the problem republics.

The demographic drain has been the highest in the Soviet Union: a 9.5 percent population loss since 1939. While this has been a common phenomenon among the north and western regions of the USSR where the war destruction was severe, Byelorussia's share was heaviest. The 1959 census listed 69 percent of the population as rural, dependent on an agriculture noted for its poor soils, fragmentized farming units, and large expanses of swamps and lowlands. In few other republics of the USSR is the organization of agriculture so atomistic, so over-populated, and with such low returns.¹

An ideological drag is the "khutor" system of land holdings, where peasants live in isolated cottages on the land rather than in villages. This pattern of farming was dominant in the Ukraine, the Baltics, and Byelorussia. It is intrinsically adapted to private farming, as against collectivization. Liquidation of the khutor system has been a militant issue in Party policy, but progress has been sticky² and no undue efforts were made to force the issue of resettlement. It remains a long-run project of intense bitterness among the peasantry.

Yet Byelorussia ranks fourth among the republics in overall economic output. In agricultural indices it generally

¹ Byelorussia is one of the regions where many collective farmers' incomes "are 3 to 4 times lower than the earnings of state farm workers." Vestnik Akademik Nauk SSSR, #3, 1960, p. 39.

² In neighboring Latvia, a Party conference set a ten-year time limit to liquidate the khutor system. Izvestia, 8 April 1960.

is in fourth or fifth position, only because of the price-favored cotton farms in Central Asia. It is a leading flax-potatoes-livestock type-of-farming region, and with its abundant water resources waterfowl farming is becoming an important enterprise. In fact, the republic was given an Order of Lenin award in 1959, perhaps more for commeration of its 40th anniversary than for any great achievements in agriculture, although Khrushchev did praise the work of the peasantry in the ceremonial speech.³

With the appointment of K. T. Mazurov as first secretary of the CC in 1956, a Khrushchev-promoted apparatchik, the tempo of development was to be accentuated. Mazurov, one of the more colorful and aggressive political consuls of Khrushchev, is capable of a productive performance at forensic functions. At both December plenary meetings of the Central Committee (in 1958 and 1959), Mazurov played a starred role as an agrarian leader in the special agricultural gatherings. His enthusiasm over his achievements became excessive on occasion, which prompted Khrushchev to engage him in sharp interrogation at the 1959 session.

Mazurov: (We) pledged to sell 50,000 tons of milk and 35,000 tons of meat over and above the plan. As of December 20 this pledge had been fully met in the case of milk; the amount of meat sold to the state had reached 30,500 tons, but the rest of the pledge will be fulfilled before the end of the month.

As of December 20, 270,435 tons of meat, liveweight, had been sold to the state, or 46,448 tons more than by the same date last year; the collective and state farms had sold the state 170% more meat than in 1953...

Khrushchev: I have some more questions....When you speak of the percentage increase, what does it mean? Did you meet your pledges for 1959 or not?

M: In meat production we did not, but in meat purchases we overfilled our pledges.⁴

K: That's why you're complicating matters needlessly and giving percentages for five or six years.
(Stir in the hall, applause)

³ Pravda, 4 Jan. 1959.

⁴ This illustrates a performance peculiar to the livestock industry: livestock marketings are a function of the previous year's harvest, so sales could be heavy in a bad crop year, as in Byelorussia's case. A good harvest is generally reflected the following year in livestock. An average for several years would be a more accurate indicator of output.

Perhaps there was no rise in former years. Now you say the rise has been greater than in the whole five-year period, but if you look into the figures for that period, you'll find the rise was measured in kilograms. The Ryazan people and Lavrionov have really put you on the spot, you see, for they made pledges and kept them. But the man who hasn't kept them squirms like a fisherman with a catfish on the end of his line. You told us you've accomplished such-and-such, produced so-and-so much, but that you've failed to fulfill your pledges; your resolve wasn't strong enough.

M: Right. I hold with that. Our pledges were very high, and we didn't meet them, but we did accomplish a great deal. Everyone wants to show the best side of his work.

K: Naturally you should show the face of your goods.⁵

Here is a classical confession by a powerful Party official on the vital art of stacking selective statistics to secure his own tenure and advancement in office in the competitive struggle within the Party hierarchy. As an accomplished practitioner of that art, Khrushchev saw through the subterfuge and called Mazurov to account, no doubt for the benefit of the record. Yet before the end of Mazurov's report he was congratulated. This is part of the mutual ritual.

A progress report on the republic's economy was recently given by Mazurov before the 24th congress of the Byelorussian CP,⁶ which provides the backdrop for a comparative analysis of the shifting patterns in the sensitive countryside adjoining the satellites.

Mazurov came forward with a rather rare economic index: the relative weights of the industrial and agricultural outputs in the aggregate economy of the republic. As Byelorussia is becoming an important industrial region of the USSR (machines, heavy motor vehicles and tractors, chemicals, fiber and food processing), this ratio is a relevant indicator of the comparative growth and resource allocations within the economy. He reported:

"Our industrial output in 1958, calculated at wholesale prices and without the turnover tax, represented 62 percent of the total output, and the gross agricultural output calculated at procurement prices represented 38 percent of the overall output."

⁵ Pravda, 24 Dec. 1959.

⁶ Sovetskaya Byelorussiya, 18-19 Feb. 1960.

With the republic's dominance on machine-motor industrial goods, the share of agricultural output valued at the modest procurement prices for potatoes and livestock products (the main products) is significantly high and illustrates the continuing weight agriculture exerts in an industrial-oriented economy. Potatoes are the principle crop of the republic, utilized as feed, food, and for industrial purposes. The sown area has been consistently expanded -- 20 percent of the cropland was planted to potatoes in 1958 -- the highest ratio in the USSR. Considerable improvements in allocations of fertilizer were also affected. Yet "progress" in the republic's leading crop presents a dismal picture.

Potato Yields - Byelorussia

	<u>Centners per Hectare</u>	<u>Area Planted (Hectare)</u>
1940	128	929,000
1958	80	1,025,000
1959	66	1,000,000

Years selected by Khrushchev (1940, 1958), Pravda, 3 Jan. 1959. 1959 data from Mazurov (op.cit.)

This is almost a 50 percent reduction from the pre-war year when 3/4 of the area was in private plots, compared to about 60 percent during 1959. Mazurov cited a 5-year average yield prior to 1958 of 80 centners a hectare, which substantiates Khrushchev's selective data (op.cit., 15 Jan. 1959).

No clue was offered for the relative performance of the private plots as against the socialized sector, for sufficient reason, as the fertility level of the plots is higher than the ill-fertilized fields of the collective and state farms. Byelorussian soil and climate are ideally adapted to potato growing, so the logical conclusion on the retrogression in output is the organization of agriculture. In the western world such a record would be a debacle.

Grain Yields

	<u>Output in Mil. Tons</u>	<u>Acreage Mil. Hec.</u>	<u>Yield per Hec. Centners</u>
1913	2.56	3.6	7.0
1940	2.72	3.4	8.0
1950	2.68	3.4	7.8
1955	1.78	3.4	5.3
1958	1.79	2.78	6.5
1959	1.72	----	6.8

1959 data from Mazurov (op.cit.). Balance from Narodnoye Khozyaistvo v 1958, p. 399, 420-1. and Posevnye Ploshchadi SSSR 1, p. 199.

This is an abject performance considering the overall progress made since 1953 in most branches of Soviet agriculture. Even the additional weight of maize to the cropping pattern depressed total yields over pre-war years. While there have been shifts away from grain to other crops, one might excuse this regression on the grounds of more rational crop planning. (Grain can be more readily grown in other areas than in the bogs of Byelorussia.) Yet, Mazurov demands 4.5 million tons grain be produced by 1965. Almost three times the 1959 crop! The republic must also meet its own grain requirements for humans as well as livestock. The target envisages unit yields of 16.15 centners a hectare compared to 6.8 centners last year. Here Mazurov faithfully follows the Khrushchevian way in planning grain mounds in the sky. Both deal in phantasy.

To the kolkhoz-sovkhoz controversy the report provides some irrefutable evidence against "the higher form of socialist farming."

"Only 49 state farms of the Ministry of Agriculture completed the economic year with a profit. The remaining 189 operated at a loss. The total losses incurred by all sovkhozy is 160 million rubles during 1959."

Thus 80 percent of the state farms suffered losses averaging 700,000 rubles a farm! This loss is equal to the average collective farm's disposable profits paid to its members for work performed. Mazurov gives one reason for the losses:

"A specific feature of the sovkhozy is the presence of too much labor. On new farms many people are not employed in production and, though they live on the territory of the sovkhoz, they are compelled to seek work in a town, while local industry meanwhile provides an incentive to peasants to work their own farm holdings. This must not be allowed to happen. It is necessary to find permanent employment for all former kolkhozniks residing on the territory of state farms...by auxiliary farm work processing, repairing, building for both collective and state farms."

On the crucial peasant issue of kolkhoz income, Mazurov, as he has been on all previous occasions, remains silent. Some of the lowest labor-day returns are earned in Byelorussia. Gross cash income for the 3,018 collective farms in 1959 was 4.3 billion rubles, or approximately 1.4 million rubles per farm compared to the 2.7 million for the average

USSR kolkhoz.⁷ This would then indicate a labor-day value at best of 5 rubles, cash and kind! Rather than provide a positive measuring peg of kolkhoz welfare, Mazurov offers a new obscurantist index so typical of the "scribbler": in 1958 the average cash income for 100 hectares farmland was 53,800 rubles!

On the dynamics of the private plot in the economic life of the peasantry, Mazurov this year is silent. A year ago, he reported 59 percent of the total milk and 66 percent of all meat produced came from the private plots. It stands to reason no undue diminution took place in this crucial sector, or else he would have given it positive tribute. The nearest he came to the nerve center of conflict between Party and peasantry was the mild comparison:

"The combined income of kolkhoz families in kind and in cash, at comparable prices, increased in the last four years 31 percent. It is characteristic that the revenue from the communal economy of the collective farms increased an average of 67 percent per family, while the revenue from the personal holdings of farmers rise 18 percent."

Without a base for comparison this is rather meaningless. It does corroborate the low communal income, in that the rise was most pronounced in this sector, in contrast to the primary source, the private plots, where a sustained growth contributed to the relatively high existing level of income. Significantly, Mazurov sounded no warnings on reducing the size of the private plots among collective farmers: only those kolkhozniks who had joined state farms, would have their plots cut down to the size of a worker's. As sovkhos employees are to be deprived of their private plots in another year (decree of December 1958), this becomes no inducement for voluntary sovkhosization.

With a rural population larger than that of hugh Kazakhstan, the second year of the 7-year plan brings no omen of well-being to the rank-and-file peasantry of Byelorussia. Faced with a sharp cut in the price structure of all farm products -- to the levels paid the state farms -- and with

⁷ Kolkhoz Income (gross) Byelorussia:

1955	-	3.1	billion	rubles
1957	-	3.8	"	"
1958	-	---	--	--

Number of kolkhozy:	Jan. 1959:	3,830, a 22% drop during 1959.
" " sovkhosy:	" "	183 compared to 238 a year later.

declining yields from field crops grown on the socialized sector, the only road toward a partial maintenance of the living levels of the peasants remains their private plots. But then, these islands of private initiative have historically commanded their allegiance.

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