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KOLKHOZ CHAIRMEN - IV

Downfall of a Khrushchevian Symbol

The skulduggery and malfeasance in office of collective farm chairmen have been fully documented in the Soviet press since the beginning of collectivization. The repetitious charges of incompetence, mismanagement, and theft against kolkhoz managers have been as regular as the changes of the seasons in the countryside. The shortage of qualified and honest managers has been one of the main weaknesses of Soviet agriculture. The rapid turnover in managerial personnel attests to this chronic institutional weakness. And despite the dispatch of hundreds of thousands of Party members and specialists over the years into management jobs on the farms, the cadre problem is still given high priority in agricultural policy decisions. Khrushchev often dramatizes the problem, as when, for example, before the July plenary session of the Central Committee he declared:

"there are farm chairmen who have ruined three collective farms and are still looking for a fourth. Yet the Party organizations put up a feeble struggle against such evils"  
(Pravda, 2 July 1959)

The alumni of ex-collective farm chairmen are legion. With the continued amalgamation of farms, however, the corps of managers is substantially reduced although it now requires a higher caliber individual to handle the complicated production and economic processes of the enlarged farms. Besides having to fulfill production goals, the farm manager is also under the added pressure of meeting State financial and marketing assignments. His personal prosperity and security are directly involved. This clearly forces the present day kolkhoz chairman to become more market conscious: to engage in active trading involving ready cash and therein lies their Nemesis. For the "little worm" of capitalism soon glows in the blandishment of the market place, which only the most ideologically resolute can resist. Thus the ranks of former kolkhoz leaders will continue to grow, albeit at a smaller rate. The occupational hazards, however, will likely remain at a high mortality percentage.

Dismissed and discredited kolkhoz chairmen have rarely been famous figures themselves nor have they headed up model farms. Now, one of the most publicized farm leaders in the USSR, head of a renowned collective farm, a pace-setting innovator cast in the mantle of a post-Stalin narodnik - an impeccable symbol of Khrushchev's agrarian reforms - has been sacked. Nikolai F. Lyskin, chairman of kolkhoz Rossiya, Stavropol territory, was dismissed by the assembled collective farmers as a "sycophant...trading.

speculator...for fraud against the State."<sup>1</sup>

Lyskin's claims to the path of glory were formidable:

- 1) Hero of Socialist Labor
- 2) Member of Supreme Soviet (4th convocation) and its Legislative Committee<sup>2</sup>
- 3) Candidate member of Lenin Academy of Agricultural Sciences<sup>3</sup>
- 4) Author of book "Kolkhoz on the Upswing"; Selkhozgiz, Moscow, 1954,

and innumerable press articles.

One of the rare farm officials to work for an advanced degree, Lyskin was widely publicized in the press during the defense of his dissertation on "The Organization of Production Processes and the Long-Range Development of Kolkhoz Rossiya".<sup>4</sup> This performance (February 1958) came at the height of the public discussions dealing with the sale of MTS machinery to the collective farms, and Lyskin, who at the time was both a kolkhoz chairman and an MTS director, was a model exhibit of the success of the Khrushchev sponsored measure.<sup>5</sup> No wonder Lenin Academy president Lobanov and numerous scientists, present in the "packed auditorium", were quoted as highly impressed with the quality of the dissertation and the official ministry paper, Selskoye Khozyaistvo, claimed it was received with "the highest esteem by the scientific council"<sup>6</sup>. The degree "Candidate of Economic Sciences" was awarded to him.

On the record it is apparent Lyskin was a dynamic and capable kolkhoz chairman, the very symbol of Khrushchev's ideal rural leader - educated, tooled with practical experience, a steadfast Party man. All the basic issues in Khrushchev's farm program were successfully mirrored on kolkhoz Rossiya's fields: amalgamation of collective farms, monthly work payments in cash, integration of production brigades, maize culture, MTS integration by the kolkhoz, communal construction program, economic accounting.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Ivan Vinnichenko, the literary ideologue on rural life and institutions,

<sup>1</sup> Izvestia, 28 August 1959.

<sup>2</sup> Izvestia, 21 April 1954.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 10 May 1956.

<sup>4</sup> Selskoye Khozyaistvo, 12 February 1958.

<sup>5</sup> For a pioneering paper, see Lyskin's "MTS and the Kolkhoz Under a Single Management", ibid., 27 December 1957, which appeared a month before Khrushchev's speech. Also Literaturnaya Gazeta, 1 December 1956.

<sup>6</sup> Supra. The Academy members had held a scientific conference at Lyskin's kolkhoz in 1956.

<sup>7</sup> Lyskin had amalgamated eight small collective in 1950 to form the 22,000 hectare Rossiya with an income of 28 million rubles in 1957. A grain - sunflower - livestock farm, it was one of the model operating units in the USSR.



whose writings frequently forecast policy changes, had been greatly impressed with the innovations at Rossiia. "What a farm!" he had exclaimed. The living levels of the members were almost equal to urban standards; kolkhoz production exceeded that of any state farm in Stavropol territory. What sense would there be to transform this successful kolkhoz into a sovkhoz, as had been done with a number of weaker farms in 1957?<sup>8</sup> While Vinnichenko had been speculating on the form of the future farm institution under communism - his preference was the direct kolkhozy-communism route, rather than through sovkhoz transformation - his lyrical praise of "Rossiia" was also a strong endorsement of Lyskin as a brilliant farm leader. It is clear, however, that Vinnichenko was unaware of Lyskin's "machinations" in the management of the collective farm. In fact, all the evidence points to his having been taken in by the wily kolkhoznik. For duplicity was one of the counts levelled at Lyskin. And that begs the question - how then did such an accomplished operator succumb?

The one public account of the Lyskin case was in a feature article by a special correspondent of Izvestia.<sup>9</sup> In the prism of hindsight, he carries the case back to 1956, at the time of the Lenin agricultural academy's gathering at the farm, when Lyskin's star was at its zenith. The plushiness of the barns at "Rossiia" caused some delegates to wonder what the costs of producing pork were; the lack of assistants around Lyskin created the impression of a one-man show, in fact, Lyskin "acted like a tsar", aloof from the farmers. When asked why the farm's long-range plan did not provide for the repayment "of the huge credits" to the State, Lyskin claimed that the MTS machinery would be paid in ten years. "What a kulak-like ideology: help yourself while the State gets nothing." Yet these are not essentially serious offenses, given the role and power of the rural elite.

The charges mount. Deliberate fraud and deceit are adduced. Back in 1952-1953 already, representatives of the farm sold products, including Lyskin's, in 33 cities and 12 villages for which he got 48,000 rubles in Minsk alone. In Kirov oblast 10,000 rubles were "earned" for the chairman. In the annual accounting with the State, it was brought out, he resorted to fictitious figures to make a showing. Even the farm bookkeepers, privy to Lyskin's private operations, swindled the farm out of 270,000 rubles by crediting relatives and friends in a "Dead Souls" transaction, with unearned labor-days.

The 1958 economic plan for "Rossiia" called for a 16 million ruble income from the livestock enterprise. In actuality 9 million were realized, resulting in a huge loss. Lyskin then launched a

<sup>8</sup> Nash Sovremennik, 1959, p. 176, also in Oktyabr, No. 11, 12, 1957. 408 collectives had been merged either into 149 kolkhozy in Stavropol territory or 110 State farms. (Pravda, 5 February 1959.)

<sup>9</sup> 28 August 1959.

massive speculative undertaking to cover up the alleged mismanagement and cash deficit by "Operation Sakhalin". No honest kolkhozniki were involved: Lyskin rounded up a group of speculators, loaded 352 tons sunflower seeds in railway freight cars and dispatched the speculators by aircraft and express train to Vladivostok and even beyond. Into the pockets of these "escorts" went 206,000 rubles for their efforts, another 68,000 ruble windfall for a sudden "weight increase" in the seeds.

This "Operation Sakhalin" netted 9 million rubles, enough to cover the deficit in the livestock section. "But the farm failed to meet its delivery obligations to the State...so the production process, the basic economic function of a collective farm, was actually retarded."

The impunity enjoyed by Lyskin aroused his greed, Izvestia claims. All his efforts were spent in driving profitable deals in the market - the collective farmers saw less and less of their chairman. Most of them saw him only at the annual business meeting of the kolkhoz. They could see him, however, on the movie screens or on TV, or his picture in the journals and newspapers, where his work was uncritically reported and where he enjoyed an undeserved popularity. But at long last, the collective farm assembly finally dismissed Lyskin. "We don't need such a fawner," said the farmers, "we want a leader who can set in motion the great reserves in our economy..." a production man, not a speculator. Thus ends the career of the doyen of kolkhoz chairmen...at least in Stavropol territory.

As the market operations of Lyskin over the years were well known in the area, why did not the local or regional Party or State organs interfere? These agencies, the Izvestia report concludes, certainly knew of the trade machinations, but laid no restraining hand on the farm leader. "His fame was great and for some people it was advantageous to warm themselves in the sunshine of his glory." This essentially, means collusion, an established practice between Soviet production and supervisory officials designed to set up mutual protective associations. The interests of survival among the managerial class in the provinces outweighed strictures on the norms of Party life.

The evidence cited, and there may well be more incriminating charges withheld, shows Lyskin as a hard-driving market operator, a master at distribution. The really only serious charge is falsification of the annual accounting with the State. His failure to include the repayment of "large State loans" in the long-range plan of the farm is a revealing admission. It substantiates the suspicion that the show-place collectives were subsidized by easy credits or outright grants in acquiring capital inputs (machinery, fertilizers, buildings) to generate greater output of products. For capital rationing is still the limiting factor in the growth of Soviet agriculture. Farms like "Kalinovka" or "Ukrainia", two of Khrushchev's favorites, did not blossom out of their own capital accumulation - their sudden emergence as models was the function of decisive financial support from the State. Such preferential cash grants are made only in exceptional cases; it reflects well on Lyskin's stature that his farm was one of the chosen.



The charge that Lyskin used on 2 specified occasions the farm's distribution system to sell 58,000 rubles worth of his own products again illustrates the great disparities between the incomes of the rural elite and the rank-and-file kolkhozniki. Farm chairmen are paid a basic monthly salary and labor-day credits; these depend on the farm's size and output. Supplementary payments in kind (and cash) are issued when the overall plan is fulfilled. As Rossiia had over 22,000 hectares, with a 28 million ruble income, and the labor-day was worth 10 rubles, 2 kilograms wheat, and 0.4 liters sunflower oil,<sup>10</sup> it is apparent Lyskin's gross income was well over 100,000 rubles in his best "harvest" year, more in line with a Soviet industrialist's take-home pay than a farm official. Here too, the "private plot" (payments in kind) was a major source of Lyskin's income and his ready access to favorable markets enhanced his "terms of trade" over the peasantry. Thus economic rent, the "private plot domain" of the kolkhoz leader, multiplied by the resources of an amalgamated farm, made inevitable the market obsessions of the "private-profit motivated" Lyskin. These manifestations "foreign to kolkhoz ideology" were primary among the causes for Lyskin's demise. For he was not accused of theft of funds or property. In fact, the whole thrust of his efforts was to maximize the farm's (and his) income - the precise objective of all commercial farms the world over!

The forced fade-out of the Hero of Socialist Labor, Lyskin till now a working model of the ideal kolkhoz leader, no doubt presages a shift in policy on the role of kolkhoz chairmen. Given the amalgamation of farms, the concentration of large numbers of technicians/Party members in the organization, along with work specialization, the logistics of supreme one-man leadership appear obsolescent. The complexities of big scale farming require decision making of high order; substantively this is better accomplished by a board of technicians reporting to a manager. As long as Lyskin concentrated on production tasks, all went well; the temptations of the market were his undoing. The stress hereafter will be on production rationalizers and mechanizers, and with the trend toward local food processing, on processors. But the ~~ways~~ of the merchandiser-market oriented farm chief are numbered. Such functions will increasingly be monopolized by the State. The private plot psychology, not only of the kolkhoz peasant but of the farm official as well, will come under sustained pressure. Finally, the great income disparities between the rural elite and the peasantry are admitted, and, conceivably, more than forensic efforts will be made to narrow them down.

In the Soviet system Lyskin's are expendable. Even Heroes of Socialist Labor. As long as the collective farm system is based on extracting a major share of farm income from the peasantry, its administrators are badgered by the dilemma of meeting the procurement demands of the State and needs of the peasantry for a greater share of the kolkhoz output. The tensions generated by these conflicting pressures account for much of the malfeasance of office within the profession. For the kolkhoz chairmen -

<sup>10</sup> Selskoye Khozyaistvo, 27 December 1957.

almost alone among Soviet executives - are daily confronted and harassed by the substance of Ricardian economics: "Who gets what." In the maze of discussion, before and after the December plenum on agricultural policy, it is certain this core of the kolkhoz issue will not be explored. Meanwhile the outlook for farm chairmen appears steady but under pressure - they will remain convenient scapegoats for the failure of farm policy, whenever occasions arise.

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