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"TOWARD THE DREAM" (1)

such a short time after the initial plow-up during 1954-55.

To Ovechkin's artistic eyes, the grain fields he saw in Siberia were veritable gardens of weeds. Such "an assortment of weeds, wild oats, and thistles" was evident not only on the new lands but the old as well; in some cases they were higher than the tractors. What provoked him was the indifference of farm officials and the absence of any preventative measures against the weed infestations.

"What caused the drop in grain yields and the spread of noxious weeds?" Ovechkin queried. He diagnosed the following:

the liquidation of a system of crop rotation, where wheat is planted year after year on the same cropland without the intermediate benefit of grassland crops, along with a widespread abandonment of fallow farming practices (tilling of land without sowing it for a season, thereby controlling weeds and building up the soil moisture).

Such practices in terms of modern science are classed as exploitation of agricultural resources. In the drier land regions of the USSR, as well as in other countries, they culminate in soil erosion, reduced crop yields, weed infestation, and in the last stage, land abandonment.

Here Ovechkin's logic ends. Responsibility for the state of affairs, he charges, rests with regional and local Party and farm officials and not on the decision of Khrushchev's crash program to plow up the prairie lands without sound plans for resource conservation. For in shifting the major grain basin from the safe fields of European Russia to the weather-hazardous stretches of Kazakhstan, western Siberia, and the Urals, Khrushchev embarked upon a great gamble. The shortness of the growing season, lack of rainfall and insufficient heat during the vegetative period are all natural hazards that science and man have scarcely mastered by modern technology. So Ovechkin resorts to trite polemics in fixing the blame on Party and cadre farm officials.

"Bureaucratic rigidity and encrusted dogma once and for all remain the worst enemies of agriculture. The agronomist ought to be the authoratative commander in agriculture just as the engineer is in industry."<sup>3</sup>

Here the author breaks a lance in favor of the broadened authority of the agronomist as against the rigid Party functionary. He praised at length the work of T. S. Maltsev, the Hero of Soviet Labor agronomist, who perfected a system of plowless rotational farming in the Urals which long has been held as a model for virgin land farming but somehow it never

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<sup>3</sup> Op.cit., 23 November 1960

was widely adapted. Ovechkin sheds new light on the sharp practices of Party officials against farm experts out on the outposts of the virgin lands.

"There were many hard days in the life of Maltsev. Many times it happened in the Spring that he received warnings against 'too early seeding,' 'sabotage,' etc. In the autumn, however, he was rightly thanked for the high yields, but not very loudly."

This is in line with some surprising suggestions in the press over the need to raise the professional standing and authority of the agronomists in farm management. There have even been proposals for granting statutory rights to the profession and the creation of an All-Union Society of Agronomists.<sup>4</sup> Their organized presence in agriculture would undoubtedly lead to tension in the decision-making councils on the farms, but the farm output would be bound to improve. The plenum's decision on this decentralization issue in kolhoz management in favor of the technician will be of vital interest to the balance of Party power in farm production.

The optimum time for seeding wheat in the new lands has become a great issue. Lysenko brought the subject to the national forum, and Khrushchev will likely settle the question at the plenum. The shortness of the growing season permits no other solution but early Spring sowing, but no spokesman will volunteer such inescapable logic. Ovechkin is all for the local agronomists, as is Maltsev, to set the date in relation to local conditions rather than to adhere to the "hard schedule set at a regional agricultural administrative level."

Ovechkin is big enough to take on the Minister of Agriculture. Matskevich is charged with completely slighting the threatening weed infestation in the virgin lands, as well as being indifferent to the need for crop rotations. He was even pictured as a proponent of rigidity in planning and management. Until now only Khrushchev has publicly taken Matskevich to task,<sup>5</sup> so the season on ministers is open at plenum time.

Like most artists Ovechkin is appalled by the specter of soil erosion. Next to the weed infested fields ("the memory of which will remain long in my mind") nothing depressed him on his going into the virgin lands as the threat of dust bowl conditions caused by the exploitative grain farming previously described. He goes into the subject with a mixture of passion and bias, but his comments on the 1960 dust storms are singularly revealing.

"This Spring there were dust storms that covered large areas of land. Four times they blew up in the Kuban. There were also areas in Siberia, Kazakhstan, and

<sup>4</sup> Selskaya Zhizn, 2 June, 17 September 1960.

<sup>5</sup> Pravda, 25 December 1959.



the lower Volga affected. Even Omsk oblast was exposed to the elemental catastrophe. Already in 1957 dust storms caused the loss of large areas of seedings here."<sup>6</sup>

This apparently is the first reference that the serious dust storms reached into the virgin lands; until now the announcements had located the disaster areas in the Ukraine and northern Caucasus. Now, the belated admission that the virgin lands were also hit by the dust storms of 1960 puts a new cast on the future of the nation's breadbasket. The degree of damage is not given, but the areas indicated and the frequency of the storms are sufficient to raise unmistakable storm warnings to Soviet authorities for a re-examination of farming practices in the new lands. All this explains the sudden stress in the press on soil erosion measures, the plethora of articles by scientists and others on cropping practices in the new lands, and the certainty that virgin land problems will receive major attention at the plenary session.

...cludes his literary piece in human values,

the need for permanent cadres, land fallowing, the seed problem, and an improvement in the managerial function on the farms. Unlike Ovechkin he feels there is an adequate supply of machinery, so the main problem is the substitution of the present migratory workers for a permanent cadre of farm workers. In Kazakhstan above 250,000 workers are brought in from the outside each year for harvesting at an average travel cost of 1,600 rubles a person. This is paid by the State and not charged to farm costs. Such workers are expensive in other aspects: they are careless with farm machinery. An instance is cited where the new self-propelled combines are burned out in 1-2 years' time when their average length of life is 7-10 years. Hereafter, workers should also be paid for preserving assigned machinery. The cultural flux given to grain farming is illustrated by one farm in Akmolinsk oblast where 60 Azerbaijanians helped with the seeding and then left, followed by 200 Ukrainians who did the harvesting. Shevchenko's recommendations follow the pattern of the past: improved housing and living conditions, incentive payments, and schooling. Small wonder that the many understaffed collectives were transformed into state farms with such disincentives.

The seed issue -- to Shevchenko's professional mind -- is the "question of questions." It is incredible to learn of the backwardness in this vital agronomic sector which requires a minimum of investment: that some farms do not even clean their seed stocks, let alone select the best strains; the absolute weight, in many cases, is inferior, with 22-25 grams weight per 1,000 grains seed. "This is not seed, but sweepings," rails the agronomist. On seed varieties it is astonishing that with the short growing season of the virgin lands some oblasts claimed that 80 percent of wheat used as seed was of a late maturing variety, and that the 1961 seed stocks were of the same strain!<sup>8</sup> The output of adaptable earlier maturing, heavier yielding wheat varieties was far in arrears and only a few pilot farms had the seed supplies. The rate of seeding was also being abused; farms will be required to use a heavier rate: 1.8-2.0 centners per hectare. The seed problem is "one of the most acute in the virgin lands" and even the First secretary has been profuse with his advice on the subject, Shevchenko reminds the audience. The failure to solve such a basic problem in crop production -- the supply of quality, adapted seeds -- is a discredit to Soviet agro-technology, and Lysenko in particular. Such problems in even the smaller western countries are solved forthwith in a season or two. For a certainty storm signals on seed will be blown up at the plenum.

The meteorological pitfalls of this year's disappointing harvest are convincingly documented by Shevchenko.<sup>9</sup> In Akmolinsk oblast, as elsewhere in the new lands, the rainfall was

<sup>8</sup> Quoting Deputy Chief, N. Kazakhstan oblast agricultural administration, Selskaya Zhizn, 3 November 1960.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 19 November 1960; lists rainfall and moisture tables by months.

optimum all season, converging mainly in July and letting up during harvesting, but the lack of warmth (too cold) during the ripening period of August/September cut the yields. The  
this elemental hazard there is no final remedy. The