

Radio Free Europe/Munich  
Office of the Policy Advisor  
Background Information USSR

7 December 1959

HUMAN PROBLEMS IN KAZAKHSTAN

In 1958 the rate of desertion from the virgin lands in Kazakhstan, partly as a result of the lack of balance between the sexes, became so substantial that the Kremlin decided to go into business as a marriage bureau. In an unprecedented move, it was decided to send 25,000 "volunteer" girls off to Kazakhstan from the overpopulated areas in the west of the USSR.<sup>1</sup> "Selection commissions" were set up at the raion and urban committee offices of the Komsomol, which were each assigned a quota of 200 girls in the case of small towns, ranging up to 2,000 in the case of Moscow.<sup>2</sup>

The press published a voluminous quantity of recruiting propaganda, making it clear that the draft of 25,000 girls was intended to reduce the labor turnover problem in Kazakhstan by making it possible for some family life to be provided for the remnants of the early pioneers. The appeal from Akmolinsk oblast, for example, addressed to "girls of the USSR," read:

"Dear Friends! You well understand that the present and the future of our farms depends on the settlement of our young cadres. We greatly need permanent workers. But what happens at present? Every year tens of thousands of remarkable lads come here from the tractor schools, demobilized soldiers return from the Army, but - and this is no secret - many of them are compelled to leave because they cannot start a family here..."<sup>3</sup>

This somewhat naive appeal went on to promise that the girls who responded would be trained as skilled workers after their arrival. The "selection commissions" were so efficient that only six months later Komsomolskaya Pravda announced overfulfillment of the target, since 30,000 girls had already been imported.<sup>4</sup>

They arrived none too soon, apparently, because the turnover of sovkhos tractor drivers had reached alarming proportions. Izvestia<sup>5</sup> reported that of the men drafted into three sovkhosy

<sup>1</sup> Komsomolskaya Pravda, 8 February 1959.

<sup>2</sup> Radio Liberation Weekly Review for March 14-20, 1959.

<sup>3</sup> Komsomolskaya Pravda, 4th January 1959.

<sup>4</sup> 29th July, 1959.

<sup>5</sup> April 21, 1959, 11th June 1959.

early in 1958 about 50% had left a year later because of the "poor living conditions". Other reasons for dissatisfaction include the low wages and primitive working conditions.

Desertion is as rife on the Kazakh building sites as in agriculture, apparently, for in May Komsomorskaya Pravda<sup>6</sup> reported a serious incident at the site of the Karaganda Metals plant, where a strike took place later in the year. A group of Ukrainian youths who had been sent to the site, perhaps without much option, told the administration that they would not work in bad conditions. They also are alleged to have demanded good housing, lockers for their clothes, a TV set and the "Arctic" wage scale, thus suggesting that by Ukrainian standards, conditions at the site left a good deal to be desired.

When the manager of the building trust explained that Karaganda was not the Arctic, that wages were based on the usual rates, and delivered them a lecture on the subject of self-sacrifice for the sake of the cause, their leader replied that they were not satisfied, and would leave for home next day. Forty-four of them subsequently did so. The case is interesting in that it illustrates a weakness in Khrushchev's 1959 reasoning concerning recruitment for Siberia, and other unattractive areas, which is based on the theory that provided living conditions are made tolerable, there is no need for extra wage incentives. But inevitably several years must elapse before the conditions in these areas can be improved appreciably and in the meantime, the old-fashioned profit motive is likely to remain the most successful recruiting agent.

Komsomorskaya Pravda published another report from the Karaganda plant five days later<sup>7</sup> which added to our understanding of the desertion. Twenty thousand youths there had nowhere to dry their clothes, there was only one bathhouse in the largest settlement with endless queues in front of it, not even the wired radio was working, the sanitary facilities were inadequate, the food was bad, and the management disinterested. The political effects of all this can be deduced from Komsomolskaya Pravda's statement that meetings of the Komsomol (nominally about 6,000 strong on the site) had to be summoned three or four times before they actually took place.

Meanwhile a stream of complaints from the disappointed girl immigrants had begun to appear. No hostels, not enough jobs, cheated out of their wages, these unfortunates were sent in one case to a sovkhos where conditions were so bad that 220 male tractor drivers out of 300 had deserted in one year.<sup>8</sup> To prevent the girls doing the same their passports

<sup>6</sup>10th May 1959.

<sup>7</sup>Komsomolskaya Pravda, 15 May 1959.

<sup>8</sup>Komsomolskaya Pravda, 26 June 1959.



were withdrawn. Another grievance, as with Karaganda, was that hot baths were provided only once a month, and the girls were still sleeping on the floor at least 3 months after their arrival.

The temperature in August sometimes falls to 2° above Centigrade in this area and by September frosts are likely to occur. The importance of the climatic conditions lies in the fact that the girls are working in many cases as combine operators, and the combines have no protection against the weather. Komsomolskaya Pravda (29 July 1959) pointed out, more in sorrow than in anger, that whereas tractor and truck drivers are sheltered by their cabins, the girls have to brave the hurricanes, cold and heat of Kazakhstan perched on the high, exposed platform of the combine.

Compared with other areas of the USSR, the Kazakh villages and settlements suffer from an unusually serious shortage of consumer goods (see Komsomolskaya Pravda, November 28th, 1959) which has now been apparent for several years - in fact ever since the mass immigration began. In one of Khrushchev's much advertized canteens (Karazhal no. 1, see Kazakhstanskaya Pravda, 5 August 1959), it takes a worker up to two hours to get his midday meal, and even the Soviet press admits that prices are often exorbitant, partly as a result of the scarcity of goods, and partly due to the dishonesty of local managers with the get-rich-quick mentality. Kazakhstanskaya Pravda also reports that immense queues for bread are a regular occurrence, and the position as regards vegetables, milk and soft drinks, to take only a few examples, is much worse.

In this connection the plight of the 1959 draft is pitiable, because its members find that the early immigrants use their influence to acquire such supplies as may become available. This was disclosed in a pathetic report by a girl from Kuibyshev, who now works in the virgin lands (see Komsomolskaya Pravda, 10th September 1959) with a large group of others from her home town:

"Noone has got frost-bite, noone has dropped from fatigue. Our difficulties are routine stuff: at first we earned little, and even that much could not be sensibly spent. In the evenings the noise of random criticism of everyone and everything carries far and wide over the steppe from the truck in which we live. Shrieking, desperate, gesticulating, Shura Denisova hit the nail on the head:

"Nobody here needs us! If cloth comes in, who buys it all up? The old inhabitants. Who has the smallest wages? We do. Where do we sleep? Wherever we are. And you should hear the brigade-leader talk to us!"

This particular batch of girls jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. It seems that they left Kuibyshev mainly because they were unemployed, since one girl told Komsomolskaya

Pravda's correspondent:

"You're from the paper?...Well, I'll tell you, I'm no patriot, and my mother isn't to blame for what I do...I came here because I couldn't find work quickly in Kuibyshev."

But as Komsomolskaya Pravda pointed out, it will be difficult to find employment for the girls during the winter in Kazakhstan. Their state farm director thinks that he can do it, but is far from being able to give any firm assurance. The idea that "nobody here needs us" has some foundation in fact, as far as the girls are concerned.

As regards the overall agricultural labor situation, Kazakhstanskaya Pravda (26 November 1959) states that another 95,000 tractor drivers will be needed by the farms for the spring season of 1960. Of these 87,000 are already available for training during the winter, and Kustanai oblast estimates that by the end of 1961 it will have enough for two-shift working.

The bulk of the farm labor force, which is underemployed during the winter, is now being urged to replace their temporary huts - their accommodation for the last five years - by more permanent structures (see Radio Moscow, 3 December 1959). The limiting factor is probably the availability of building materials, which are in short supply even in much more accessible parts of the USSR than Kazakhstan.

Like many another outpost of empire, Kazakhstan has begun to consider itself a forgotten land, which must add to the depression of the pioneers. The republican newspaper recently published an editorial calling on the prosperous centers of Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and Alma-Ata to provide some tangible aid to correct the slump in morale:<sup>9</sup>

"...It has been reported that the assistance (shevstvo) of the towns to the workers in the virgin lands has come practically to an end. This applies first of all to the Komsomol organizations of Kazakhstan, Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev. The young patriots who have come to reclaim virgin lands have fulfilled a very important task assigned them by the motherland. What moral right have the town dwellers to forget the people they have sent? The entire country is proud of their feats which are unprecedented in history. Giving assistance to the virgin land sovkhozes is a noble and responsible duty which can be entrusted only to the best Komsomol organizations and the foremost enterprises and educational establishments."

But no news has yet been received of any concrete results from this appeal, and meanwhile recruitment for work in the Kazakhstan villages will remain far from easy. An indication of this was provided in Kazakhstanskaya Pravda, (17 November 1959) which reported that although 1500 teachers have graduated in

<sup>9</sup> Alma-Ata Radio 4 December 1959.



Alma Ata this year, the village schools are still undermanned, while in the capital teachers are besieging the employment office for two or three years on end in an endeavour to avoid a job in the country. The number of unemployed teachers in the capital must be close on a thousand, since Kazakhstanskaya Pravda reports 260 both in Stalin and Frunze raions, and about 200 in the other two raions. The paper sees this high unemployment rate as being due to "serious defects in ideological and political work" which leads to "desertion" and "unprincipled refusal to teach in the villages".

There is little doubt that ideological enthusiasm in Kazakhstan as a whole must be at a low ebb, but it is evident that the neglect by the Party to provide even a tolerable standard of living in the countryside is a major factor in the "ohne mich" attitude of so many young graduate teachers.

r.r.g.