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MASTERS OF THE LAND - PART I

A Crucial Agrarian Issue

The organization of the labor force on collective and state farms is gradually becoming the single most important issue in Soviet agrarian policy and could well reach a crucial stage in the near future. The discussion of measures to improve the agricultural economy has reached a crescendo in the wake of a second poor harvest in the last three years. In particular, the issue as to the size and functional rights of farm labor units -- whether the present system of using large work brigades should be replaced by small labor teams -- is the kernel of controversy. The resolution of the brigade-team debate in the Soviet Union would have profound reverberations in the agricultural policies of the other communist countries, China included, and could well presage fundamental changes in the structure, and indeed the very existence, of socialized agriculture in the communist countries.

The brigade-team issue has been a controversial political and ideological issue since the thirties. It created schisms within the party leadership and caused the purge of a leading Politburo member and his supporters. As Soviet innovations and experience in agriculture are generally adopted in some form or another by the other communist countries, it is in order to examine in perspective the substance and direction that such a decisive development would have in the future evolution of communist agriculture.

The Historical Perspective

When the Soviets socialized their agriculture into collective and state farms, there existed no precedent for the organization of labor on the land. Since membership of a

collective farm is comprised of its labor force, theoretically the leaders of a farm could set the work schedule. This held good as long as the kolkhozy consisted of 10 to 20 neighboring households, but as the average membership suddenly swelled five-fold and more during the period of forced collectivization, the labor force became disorganized and so inefficient that losses in harvesting were directly attributed to the peasantry. Parenthetically, this was just at the time when the charge of "wrecking" in kolkhoz construction was directed at kulak elements in the countryside. The only measure the party leadership could suggest to correct the labor problem was that the formation of experienced cadres of leaders in production, among which brigadiers (leaders of field work brigades) were listed.

The brigade concept itself was announced in an official party resolution of February 4, 1932. It stated that "a brigade must become the most important element in the organization of labor on the collective farms." Each field brigade would be assigned a definite number of workers for the whole season, supplied with draft animals, basic machinery, and implements, for which the brigade would be responsible. Each unit would be assigned a designated area of land to work for the entire cropping rotation. In these years the brigade consisted of 40 to 60 workers, depending on locality and different cropping systems, headed by a brigadier, a deputy, and an accounting clerk, all appointed by the farm chairman. In 1935 the brigade concept was strengthened by a juridical measure when the Second Kolkhoz Congress approved the model kolkhoz charter in which the position of the brigade, as the basis of the organization of the kolkhoz labor force, was formalized.

Conditions on the collective farms were primitive. The kolkhozy had only draft horses and oxen, carts, and hand implements as tools to till the soil. The farms had to rely on the state-operated machine tractor stations (MTS) for the machinery service to plow and harvest the fields. There were few experienced farm leaders the party could trust in actual field management. Party members active in agricultural production were a rarity. The peasants themselves were at best disaffected with collectivization and required constant supervision. Their labor was wholly manual and ill paid. Given the resources and problems of the time, the field brigade system was perhaps best adapted to bring some order and output out of the amorphous mass of peasantry.

The larger brigades had to be divided into smaller units for administrative purposes and for specific crops. These smaller

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- 1) Kollektivizatsiya selskogo khozyaistva. Postanovlenie 1927-1935, 1957, p. 409.

teams (zveno, literally, "link"),² were originally used for labor-intensive crops, such as sugar beets but later extended to potatoes, flax, and vegetables.

By the mid-thirties, when collectivization had been completed, the labor teams, usually operating as a subdivision of the brigade, were rather extensively employed in field operations, particularly in row crops. Each team generally consisted of six to seven persons, often including many members of the same family and relatives of all ages and sexes. One worker acted as leader and each team was responsible for a designated area of land. As long as the farms did not have their own machinery, but were dependent on the MTS for custom tractor work, the smaller team labor unit simplified supervision, stimulated personal interest in the workers, and created some incentives based on production results. But the lack of mechanization created handicaps especially, the timely harvesting of the field crops. Nonetheless, by 1939, 65 percent of a representative sample of collective farms investigated had their work brigades sub-divided into teams and the average they worked amounted to 37 percent of the total cropland³ on the farms investigated.

The "team" system of labor organization was given an extensive trial run of five years before it was officially accepted as party policy. At the 18th Party Congress in March 1939, the agricultural spokesman of the Politburo, A.A. Andreev, endorsed the team system in terms that were echoed a quarter of a century later in the Zhulin proposals:

The organization of work and management are becoming more and more urgent on the collective farms...the main question is to make the collective farmers interested in securing good harvests...Actually, the difficulty of further increasing labor productivity is due mainly to equalitarianism... and is further due to depersonalization, under which collective farmers working in large brigades are not held personally responsible for the quality and quantity of their work...This means that the more the work on the collective farm is individualized, that is, performed by separate teams of collective farms, and the greater the material encouragement of the labor, the more efficient it will be as regards crop yields.

2) In the context of this study, the terms team, link, zveno are identical. Jasny claims that the zveno principle was initially recommended in a state and party decree of May 27, 1933. The Socialized Agriculture of the USSR, 1949 p. 336.

3) Ibid.

Andreev went on to describe a model kolkhoz:

...each team being assigned a definite plot of land where it goes through the whole process of preparing for the sowing and looks after the crops. In this way every piece of sown land in our collective farm has actually a master of its own who takes care of it.⁴

[Emphasis supplied]

The team system was also endorsed by Molotov, then Soviet premier, and adopted by a resolution of the Congress in order "to increase the productivity of labor, to encourage the most efficient collective farmers, and to introduce extensively the system of working in teams on the collective farms."

During World War II and the postwar reconstruction period -- in the late forties, a decade in all -- the team system was the official policy and practice in the organization of labor on both collective and state farms. By 1938, Khrushchev had become an early enthusiast of the team system in agriculture during his tenure as Party First Secretary in the Ukraine. The loss of horse and tractor power during the war did much to enhance the position of the zveno system as did the chronic machinery shortages during postwar reconstruction.

In the agricultural policy disputes following the war, the team or zveno system played a leading role. Encouraged by the hope that after the war the kolkhoz structure would be changed to a mixed public-private property system, the peasants had considerably enlarged their private holdings of land and livestock without state approval. Some foreign observers claimed some peasants were farming ten hectares and more privately during these years, instead of the one-half hectare limit set by the model charter. In 1946, however, Stalin instituted sharp measures to restore to the collective farms the land and machinery which had been usurped by the peasantry. Although some administrative changes were also introduced, zveno continued to exist for a little longer. Then, without warning in February 1950, a complete reversal in the team system was promulgated. An unsigned article in Pravda condemned Andreev, the long time Politburo member in charge of agriculture, for his advocacy of the zveno system. It was alleged that

- 4) The Land of Socialism Today and Tomorrow, 18th Party Congress Proceedings, 1939, pp. 260-261.

the team system obstructed the effective use of tractor-drawn machinery and split the collective farmer into small scale operating units dependent on individual hand labor. The effect of this was alleged by the Pravda article to be to negate "the real basis for the transformation of the peasant, and for remaking his psychology in the spirit of socialism." Retention of the zveno system "would mean undermining the very foundations of large-scale collective socialist agriculture." The concluding words of the article -- inspired or written by Stalin -- affirmed that the production brigade was the only correct form of labor organization conducive to the interests of the organizational and economic consolidation of the kolkhozy.

Within a week Andreev publicly submitted to the Party line in an article in Pravda:

I have never intended that the brigades should be replaced by teams, but the inaccurate formulations of my statements in regard to the relationship of the team to the brigade led to interpretations of this kind. It is clear that the basic labor organization in the kolkhozy must be the brigade, and in the brigade itself all obstacles must be removed and conditions created for the most productive use of machinery, from which it follows that teams are inappropriate for grain farming.

Fully agreeing with the criticism in the Pravda article, both of the distortions committed by the Kursk regional committee, and of my own wrong viewpoint, I shall seek to set them right in my work and shall combat all kinds of distortions in this respect.⁵

The veteran Andreev, as a result of this attack, disappeared from prominence and no longer played a role in political affairs, although he was not disgraced. In 1953, at the 19th Party Congress, he was dropped from the Party Presidium, but remained a member of the Central Committee. Although Khrushchev had supported the zveno system since the late thirties, the reference in the Pravda attack on Andreev to the Kursk obkom distortions in the formation of teams in grain farming was actually an attack on Khrushchev. It was another

5) Pravda, 28 February 1950.

dramatic case in which agricultural policy differences had become a pawn in the power struggle of the Kremlin, both before and since Stalin's death. But even in 1950 Khrushchev had become too powerful for his opponents to attack directly. At this strategic juncture, Khrushchev presented his own scheme for the amalgamation of collective farms as a counter solution for increased production. It was openly launched in his name. By then he had replaced Andreev as the acknowledged spokesman on agriculture in the party. The amalgamation of collective farms into larger units was given a green light by the Kremlin and carried out with dispatch. By the end of 1950, the 252,000 collective farms had been reduced to 121,400; by the end of 1952 there were only 94,800. The Khrushchev merger campaign, it was claimed, would increase farm output, reduce costs, and insure larger deliveries to the state. Primarily, however, it was intended to tighten the party's control over the kolkhoz structure so that every farm would have a primary party organization. This would permit a greater concentration of reliable party members directly in the kolkhoz production line and so end the stagnation in farm output. Together with the ascendance of the brigade, the merger policy represented a one-two thrust at tightening party control in the guidance of forty million peasants working in agriculture. Another Khrushchev innovation at this juncture -- the agrogorod plan -- proved abortive and was scuttled by the Kremlin.

A Balanced Judgment

Central to the sweeping reversal in policy which returned the brigade to its position of dominance in kolkhoz labor organization was the need for tighter party control over agriculture. There were three factors involved. First, an esprit-de-corps made itself felt among the working group of family members, relatives, and friends that comprised the zveno units. It was feared by the Party that the zveno system would develop in the direction of the pre-collectivization village and the mir of Tsarist times. Left unchecked, the movement could easily have led to the assignment of plots for individual and private cultivation as, indeed, actually occurred during and after the war. Secondly, the dispersion of authority within the zveno and particularly in the cases in which the small units were responsible for the discharge of compulsory deliveries of farm products to the state, made the brigade a more efficient instrument of control in agriculture. Thirdly, the raison d'etat for the abolishment of the zveno system was, in the words of an official authority on Soviet agriculture, the apprehension that the small zveno unit might eventually supplant not only the brigade but also the kolkhoz itself.

- 6) L. Volin, A Survey of Soviet Russian Agriculture, USDA, 1951, p. 30.

The Khrushchevian Reforms

The brigade system maintained its supremacy during the greater part of the post-Stalin reforms. Tractor brigades had always been the basis of the MTS table of organization, and livestock brigades in the expanding meat-milk sector became fairly well established. But the one innovation that had tremendous impact on labor organization in agriculture was the decision to dismantle the MTS's and sell their tractors and machinery to the collective farms. This was accomplished in 1958 after the Molotov-Malenkov "anti-party" group had been emasculated. The MTS had multi-functions: it provided the power machinery and skilled personnel to the kolkhozy, it acted as the primary organ of party control over the countryside and, perhaps most important, it served as an effective collecting agency for farm products. Collecting both compulsory deliveries and payments in kind for MTS work on the farms were among the functions of the machine tractor stations. The collective farms now were larger, had more party members on their staffs, and with the transfer of hundreds of thousands of mechanizers to the farms Khrushchev felt it time to liquidate the anachronism of having "two masters on the land." The functions of party control were accordingly decentralized: the local district party committee (raikom) and the primary party organization of the kolkhoz would act as the watch dogs in reconciling the interests of the state needs for production with the aspirations of the collective farmers.

With the liquidation of the MTS tractor brigades, the Soviet authorities promoted the concept of the comprehensive or integrated brigade. (kompleksnaya brigada). It generally replaced the old field brigade. Another type was known as the permanent production brigade, although the comprehensive brigade was considered the more progressive. The distinguishing features of the comprehensive brigade were that it was mechanized, served several types of crops, and extended its operations to include the livestock sector. The personnel, both skilled and unskilled, were permanently attached. It was broken down into teams or zveno but these were not independent units. The brigade was responsible for a certain area of land but the various field jobs were done by different work units. In other words, one unit did the plowing and another the harvesting. There was no actual "master of the land" operational concept. For the USSR as a whole the brigades grew in size from 89 members farming 485 hectares of cropland in 1957 to 121 members handling 590 hectares in 1961.

The zveno or team structure has undergone changes within the brigade system in recent years which were strategic in nature. Where the team had been primarily based on hand labor, now it was elevated into an advanced order, that of a

mechanized zveno. It was not independent, but wholly integrated into the brigade. The more abundant supply of farm machinery by the late fifties no doubt was responsible for the development of the mechanized teams: in 1958 there were 22,000 while by 1960 they had reached 130,000.⁸ While this last distribution amounted to an average of only two and a half units per farm mainly concentrated in maize, cotton and sugar beet production, significantly all row crops, it did provide a model base for further expansion of the principle.

Like other changes of Soviet agrarian policy, the independent mechanized team organization of kolkhoz and sovkhoz labor had trial runs before they were publicized. It seems that the final and advanced stage of the independent mechanized team was reached in 1961 in the Altai territory, where the revolutionary concept originated of assigning definite areas of land and making the team personally responsible for the entire cycle of cropping operations.

Khrushchev's last year in office, 1964, saw the team system widely propagandized but not officially endorsed. The campaign got into high gear when he devoted a large part of his marathon speech on agricultural policy to the effectiveness of the team system in raising both yields and labor productivity. Then in August, while on a 10 day tour of the provinces to take full political advantage of a record harvest, Khrushchev followed up the issue with charges that the present system for the organization and payment of farm labor "breeds lack of interest and responsibility." One worker plows, another sows, while a third reaps and the workers are paid independently of yields or quality of work done. He proposed that the mechanizers be assigned areas of land on which they would be responsible for the whole cycle of production: plowing, seeding, harvesting. Payments would be dependent on the output.¹⁰ While he did not cite the team as superior to the brigade, the successful examples cited were mainly those of mechanized teams. On the following day, Pravda and the provincial press published a success story of a Virgin Land sovkhozy director, Likhobaba, who was widely quoted as the innovator of a new system in labor payments. Each unit of workers is paid on the basis of the crop produced on land assigned to them, with a series of advance payments tiding them over to the next harvest. If the plan is fulfilled, at year's end they receive 25 percent premium pay. However, a base yield must be met before the incentive payments are operative.

8) Ibid, p. 10.

9) Pravda, 22 August 1964.

10) Speech at Saratov oblast. Pravda, 5 August 1964.

This base is not the planned goal, as is customary, but rather a 5 to 10 year average.

Khrushchev persistently discussed the incentive and labor productivity issues on the tour. He made 17 stops but did not take up the brigade-team dialogue until the end of the tour. This in itself was striking for so voluble a personality. Considering that he had been an advocate of the team system since the late thirties, with some political pauses as the exception, it is rather obvious that the opposition to the zveno must have been formidable and persuasive. But the document that finally clarified the issue was an exchange of letters between the First Secretary and the members of a Komsomol mechanized section (otryad) from Sovkhoz Lenin Kustanai Oblast in the Virgin Land territory. This document was widely reproduced and appeared in Pravda, 22 August 1964, after Khrushchev's return from his last farm tour.

He congratulated the section of 15 young mechanizers for developing and improving an effective form of labor organization and method of wage payment. He subscribed wholly to their organizational structure: 2970 hectares of cropland assigned to the 15 man unit (both land and personnel on a permanent basis), 12 tractors, 8 combines, and other necessary machinery. The unit formulated its own cropping practices based on production-cost studies for the area, and disbursed wage payments and premiums based on output and costs of production. This independent mechanized section¹² instilled in its members a sense of personal responsibility for the assigned area of land as well as for the harvest, which Khrushchev considered the heart of the problem of raising labor productivity. He recommended that thorough study and widespread discussion on adopting the 15 Komsomols' model system be carried out throughout the country.

It will be seen that the Komsomol model of the Lenin sovkhoz is identical in all essential details with the Zhulin proposal of August 1965. Had Khrushchev not been deposed six weeks later he would have expanded on the mechanized team discussion by now.

The Brezhnev and Kosygin Position

The new leadership, no doubt aware of the disruptive potential of the brigade-team issue, has refrained from committing itself. There was no mention of the subject

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- 12) The section differs from the team only in being larger and having more mechanization: teams generally have 8 to 10 members, a section about 15.

in Brezhnev's speech at the agricultural plenum on March 1965. The revolutionary impact of the main features of the team system -- the concept of assigning land and power machinery for a long period to a small team of skilled workers (many of them young) and making them responsible for all field operations without the restraints of centralized control -- is that of an ideological bombshell of such force that to ignore the issue with silence or handle it irresolutely could well be politically fatal for any Kremlin leadership.

The Last Phase: The Komsomolskaya Pravda Campaign

It is not accidental that Komsomolskaya Pravda, as the organ of the Young Communist League, has been the main spokesman in propagating the mechanized team system. The theme "master of the land" is seldom seen in other Soviet papers. The intrinsic appeal of a membership in a mechanized team and of the implied freedom of decision-making in running farm operations has an understandably strong attraction for the young people. Komsomolskaya Pravda has long warned that the flight of the young men from the farms to the cities has created a serious labor shortage in precisely the farm sector where it is most needed -- in mechanization. Accordingly, Komsomolskaya Pravda has been in the vanguard of pioneering the publication of revolutionary innovations in the organization of farm labor.¹³ What Stalin condemned as "distortions in kolkhoz labor organization" in 1950, the Young Communist League organ now considers to be the primary means to resolve the urgent task for the upsurge of Soviet agriculture.

The most persuasive call for change came in the Zhulin proposals in the Komsomolskaya Pravda issue of 7 August 1965.¹⁴ For the first time, the difficulties in agriculture were blamed on the Soviet system itself. Zhulin came to the kernel of the charge:

To create the conditions which will stimulate the peasant to achieve the highest yields ... we must consider how and what is necessary to make the peasant feel responsibility for the harvest daily, hourly, the whole year long. No agronomic or social control can compensate for this absence of responsibility.

[Emphasis supplied]

13) For example, in the issues of 3 December 1964, 25 May 1965, 7 August 1965, 17 August 1965.

14) See Background Information paper "Masters of the Land," 10 August 1965, for a detailed analysis of the proposal.

The Altai agronomist proposed an ideal order of labor organization that still remained within the communist ideological framework of the social ownership of the means of production. Essentially, it was strikingly similar to the mechanized section structure of the previously-described Sovkhoz Lenin in Kustanai Oblast. Mechanized teams, starting with four to six mechanizers as a permanent staff, would be allocated a definite amount of state or collective farm land and machinery "for years." They would be held responsible for the complete cycle of cropping operations. Much of the decision-making would devolve on the team; they would keep their own records and distribute the earnings among themselves. This freedom to decide themselves how to farm the land assigned would provide the incentive for them to assume the personal responsibility essential to "raise labor productivity and to insure high yields." This is the substance of the Zhulin proposals -- almost utopian in its revolutionary sweep.

The Balance

It is rather striking how the red thread of the farm labor organizational structure has run through the fabric of communist agrarian policy ever since collectivization. It has been a recurrent theme for thirty-five years. For the key to human progress in agriculture is essentially to be found in raising labor productivity. While the lack of mechanization was first advanced as the rationale for priority given the team system, now the growing base of machinery is being held out as the logical reason for adoption of the mechanized team. But the revolutionary significance of the proposals lie in identifying a small group of skilled men, many of them young, with the concept of working public land and property for their own personal benefit. As the units would be relatively independent and free to exercise a choice of alternative in resource use and distribution, the whole concept of party control would be jeopardized. This is the issue that causes the party to drag its feet and is an island of opposition. For a certainty, the team structure and the implied independence would be enthusiastically received throughout the Soviet countryside. Positive results in output would surely show up. Yet, the specter that the small team unit might eventually supplant not only the brigade but the kolkhoz itself haunts the party conscience and stays its hand.