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Department: Soviet Union - cz)

The reported panic buying of potatoes in Moscow is a reflection more of the failure of the Soviet distribution system to function, and of the anxiety of consumers over food supplies following the current wheat crisis, than an indication of a serious set-back to the potato crop. Unlike the wheat crop, which is 99 percent concentrated in the socialized sector of Soviet agriculture, the potato industry is the mainstay of the private sector. Last year, 70 percent of the total output of potatoes was grown on the private plots of peasants and workers. Fully one-half of the cropland in the private sector grows potatoes and yields annually 50 million tons. The yield efficiency of the private plots is a convincing testimonial to private initiative.

POTATO YIELDS PER HECTARE

Private Sector	119	quintals
Socialized Sector	62	"

Thus the private holdings are virtually twice as productive as the sovkhos-kolkhoz fields. And in poor years the advantage tends to be even greater.

In 1962, a relatively short crop was harvested, 69.7 million tons compared to 80.4 million in 1961. State purchases dropped from 7 million tons to 5.7 million. Another 5-7 million tons were sold directly by the plot owners. The wide spread indicates that a major share of the tubers remains on the farm as food for humans and feed for livestock.

Thus a shortage of potatoes as food for human consumption is remote. Difficulties could occur in providing adequate supplies for livestock feeding, but the very strength of the industry lies in the stability of private plot production. If potatoes were exclusively grown in the socialized sector, it is not unlikely the Soviet government would be importing spuds this year as they are wheat and flour.

As a commentary on the comparative price mechanism operating in a command economy and a free market, the potato issue is revealing. Current prices in Munich for potatoes packed in plastic bags: 4 kopecks (18 pfennige) a kilogram; on the Moscow free market (bring your own containers), 30 to 40 kopecks a kilogram.

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*All data from official Soviet sources.