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AN ANNUAL RITUAL -- A SOVIET HARVEST DECREE

Summary: The joint decree of the CPSU CC and the Council of Ministers on measures to ensure the safe bringing in of the Soviet harvest this year is a continuation of long-established Soviet policies to add a sense of urgency and struggle to a routine operation, not a crash program to save the harvest. The anomalies of communist agriculture stand out: under-mechanization and labor shortage in a society with a large rural population. The B & K leadership still follows Stalin's policy of distrust of the farms to store and deliver their grain during the off-season, as is the custom in the West.

The task of organizing the harvesting of crops in the socialized agricultural systems in the communist countries is such an enormous undertaking that it is the subject each season of rather frequent state and Party decrees and decisions. In fact, one criterion of the solution of agricultural problems in communist systems would be a cessation of decrees on harvesting.

Therefore, the recent appearance of a 2,000-word joint decree of the CPSU Central Committee and the USSR Council of Ministers "on measures for securing the harvest of crops and the procurement of agricultural products for 1969," is another "call-to-duty" document in the agrarian ritual prescribed by the Kremlin to expedite harvesting. (1)

(1) Pravda, Izvestia, the central press in general, 15 June 1969.

Some Western sources, on the other hand, have described it as a crash program to save the harvest, already threatened by bad weather and shortages of industrial inputs.

At the present time, there is no indication that a grain crisis is in store this year. Winter grains in areas of the Ukraine, the North Caucasus, and Black Earth Belt were severely damaged by winterkilling and a cold, delayed spring set back the spring grains. But otherwise weather conditions thereafter have to date not resulted in further damage. A frequent complaint in the press has been the excessive early growth of weeds in the fields, caused by the slow start of the grains. This condition will raise further the excess moisture and impurities content of the grain, already a disturbing factor.

It is fairly definite, however, that the winter grain setback is so sharp that the overall grain output this year will be substantially less than in 1968, the second best harvest year on record. It is still too early to estimate the contours of the 1969 harvest.

The substance of the June 15 harvest decree deals with maximizing the assistance to agriculture of industry, the ministries, and state agencies. Skilled manpower to operate trucks, machinery, and do repair work will again be furnished by industry and the enterprises, who will pay part of the costs. Wide power is granted authorities to dispatch fuel, extra food, machinery, and other goods to the harvesting centers. Bonus payments in cash and the right to buy a share of products harvested are also granted to workers fulfilling work norms. Combine operators may purchase up to one ton of grain for their own use. Officials are authorized to use any type of available shelter to store temporarily the delivered grain in order to avoid losses. Trucks are to operate day and night, with a two-man shift at hand. Fuel and repair depots are to be centrally located to make supplies more available.

The decree shows no unusual alarm over the inherent defects of the Soviet harvest campaign. The issues it promulgates are standard measures, but with each year the conditions seem to become more generous. This decree certainly will be the costliest one on record. But that is understandable -- the grain problem has yet to be solved: to produce high and stable yields.

The Soviet decree again illustrates the anomalies of most communist agricultural structures: under-mechanization and a shortage of farm workers at harvest in a society characterized by an excess rural population. The low labor productivity based on hand labor and seasonal unemployment acts as a brake on rural progress. Consequently, at crucial peak work periods, the Soviets must resort to emergency measures to ensure the delivery of the harvest.

This is the substance of the current decree, in tone much like its predecessors, in content more liberal.

There is also a political note to the chronic emergency harvest decisions. The Soviets insist that the grain be shipped directly to the central granaries, elevators, and storage sheds off the farm. In most Western countries, much grain is stored on the farms and sent to the elevators in the quiet winter season. Stalin, according to Khrushchev, did not trust the farms with their grain and it had to be sent immediately to the state agencies. Khrushchev talked of breaking this cycle and introducing a more orderly, more rational storage, cleaning and marketing of grain from farm to elevator in separate operations extending into the winter. (2) But apparently he was overruled and the present B & K leadership follows Stalin's policy of not trusting the farms to store and deliver their grain in an orderly fashion.

As a final note on the continuing cycle of Soviet harvesting decrees, it is significant that no decree has ever appeared on the need for timely harvesting on the private plots.

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(2) Kazakhstanskaya Pravda and Pravda, 15 August 1964.

Speech at Tselinograd, Kazakhstan, shortly before his dismissal.