

Food for peace? Or for civil war? (Soviet Union)

By Vladimir Kvint

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WHY IS THE SOVIET UNION hungry? Why does the biggest and potentially the richest country in the world have empty shelves in the stores?

The hunger is real. In the U.S. people consume over 53 pounds of meat per capita per year; in the U.S.S.R., if you count the bone and gristle, just 26 pounds. Okay, maybe Americans eat too much meat. But what about fruit? Americans eat three times more fruit than do people in the U.S.S.R. Even these figures are for more normal times. These are not normal times. Real hunger looms in the land that was once the breadbasket of Europe.

So, unless Americans and Europeans want to see Soviet food riots and malnourished Soviet children on the nightly TV news, they are going to have to ship food to the Soviet Union. Done the right way, such food aid can help feed the truly hungry. Done the wrong way, it can hasten a civil war.

Russia has an image as a freezing country where nothing really grows. But the Soviet Union's food crisis has nothing to do with resources. The country has vast and fertile lands—470 million acres of rich black earth. (Compare that to the approximately 250 million acres that make up the U.S.' Corn Belt.) In the Republic of Georgia, people say that if you drive a stake into Georgian land, tomorrow you will see grapes there.

This year the country had again a blessing of a crop and a curse of a system; 230 million tons of grain were borne by the fields, while the U.S.S.R. was buying 30 million tons abroad.

This is not a problem of equipment. The U.S.S.R. has 200,000 more grain harvester combines than the U.S. has. Soviet tractors, the Belarus and the Vladimirets, are of good quality, but the farmer is not interested in using them. Why bother? The land does not belong to him.

Are Russians lazy? Not by nature. Only by training—goofing off is the only way you can beat the system. In such matters one can't divorce current events from history. The roots of today's food problem in the U.S.S.R. go back

to 1917, when the October Revolution took agriculture from the people and gave it to the state to use for state purposes.

By 1910, well before the revolution, the reformist Prime Minister Piotr Stolypin had pushed through a reform to give land and economic freedom to the peasants. Some peasants used their new freedom wisely, some squandered the fruits. The entrepreneurial peasants got the name "kulaks"—literally, "first"—meaning that they grasped their households firmly in their hands.

By 1913 the kulaks had created solid, strong farms and even small agro-industrial complexes. Not only did they produce their own grain, they raised cattle, invested in equipment for cattle raising and milk production and developed transportation networks to get their goods to market. At that time the kulaks together with well-to-do peasants constituted 35% of all peasant households. A full one-third of Russia's peasantry was well on its way to middle-class status.

The curtain began to fall on Russian agriculture in the autumn of 1917. Lenin's Bolsheviks ignited the hatred of ill-tidings, shiftless drunkards against the kulaks. Starting with the October Revolution, whatever the kulaks earned was taken away. They were murdered; their farms, created by long labor, were set on fire. Hard workers were the people's enemies.

Building on Lenin, Stalin sent train-loads of hungry and naked kulaks with exhausted sick babies and dumped them in the depths of the frozen desert. It was one of the worst genocides in human history—all done in the name of the people. For the Bolsheviks this was sound policy: A prosperous peasant would never make a good communist. A city worker, well fed by the state, might.

The Bolsheviks took over from the kulaks, and here are some of the results as calculated by the Moscow University agrarian specialist Professor Aleksei Yemelyanov: From 1928 to 1934, cattle and meat production fell 40%, production of eggs more than 70%. In 1929, 5.8 million tons of meat were produced. In 1934, only 2 million. Agriculture in the Soviet Union never recovered.

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The Bolsheviks declared this war not only against the kulaks but also against the very idea of private property, and especially private ownership of land. In this regard, the right-wingers around Mikhail Gorbachev are the Bolsheviks' faithful descendants. They may compromise on accepting elements of a market economy, but on private ownership of land, never, unless they are made to do it.

Having eliminated the hardest-working part of the peasantry, the Bolsheviks re-enslaved the rest, and they have remained enslaved in all but name ever since. Slaves and spongers. With nothing to gain by working hard, they worked hardly at all. This year, for example, huge crops of potatoes were left to rot in the fields. Why bother? The farmers had all the potatoes they could eat and the produce of the state farms did not belong to them, so they didn't bother harvesting it. In the past, a shortage of produce would have been attributed by the officials to bad weather, but now the truth is out.

What development the communists managed went to the military and to the cities. Russian villages are strikingly poor and gloomy. The quality of the roads is such that a Jeep Cherokee would vanish into the mud and never be seen again. The roads are decrepit, partially because of poverty and partially on purpose, to hold the people in the villages. Up until Stalin's death the peasants were so enslaved they did not even have I.D. papers and permits to go to the cities. The Stalinist order has long since broken down. With nothing to hold them in the countryside, the peasants flock to the cities. Today many villages are deserted.

What about the food that does get into the Soviet distribution system? The system has a simple feudal character: It is an exchange of goods, services and favors. I fix your car, you give me good meat. Money, the paper ruble, has no purchasing power. People forage and trade much as they did five centuries ago. A typical example:

Every morning in a Moscow high-level hospital, a nurse takes the ration cards of all the doctors and all the staff and goes food-hunting. By the end of the day she arrives with her trophies. A ruler is applied to a long sausage stick. Everyone gets an equally tiny piece.

Privileged bureaucrats do not measure their sausages in inches. Rubles in the hands of ordinary people are nearly worthless because people with goods to sell want other goods in return; the rubles buy nothing. But rubles of the regional party boss and rubles of the ordinary peasant in the same region are different rubles. The ruble loses its power if you don't have special permission, in the form of a coupon, to buy specified goods.

Recently in several big cities, such as Leningrad and Chelyabinsk in the hungry Urals, enormous quantities of meat were discovered that has been hidden underground and allowed to rot. Was this sabotage by the right-wingers, who see crisis as their chance to reimpose dictatorship? I cannot prove it, but I certainly suspect this to be the case. And Gorbachev these die-hard communists.

Back to the question of food aid to the Soviet Union. Western support for Gorbachev is one of the cornerstones of his drive for power. Already Foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze's dramatic, sacrificial resignation is being forgotten. Roland Dumas, the French foreign minister, said, after Shevardnadze's resignation, that it is even more important to help Gorbachev now.

If the U.S. and Western Europe send food to Gorbachev's centralized Soviet government, here is what will happen: Distributing the food will fall to the KGB, according to Gorbachev's order. The KGB will distribute the food to its own people, to the arm and to the party bureaucrats. The food will show up in neither the state stores nor the private markets. Rather, part of it will be distributed through the system of stores known as *Raspredelitel*—stores at which only privileged party members are allowed to shop. Very little of the food will reach ordinary people.

With a satisfied army and KGB, Gorbachev will be ready to send troops to the rebellious republics. This will be the beginning of a bloody civil war.

If the West sends food, its distribution should be decentralized. Food should be earmarked to specific republics, cities, villages, hospitals and orphanages where the need is greater. It is possible, through the local authorities, to get the addresses of those in greater need.

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Unless the Soviet system is replaced, the country's 300 million people cannot be fed. By its very nature, socialism creates corruption and dishonor. Adam Smith wrote, in effect, that if today a country is without honor, tomorrow it will be without bread. The Soviet system lacks honor and deprives the people of their bread.