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Karl Marx Was a City Boy

Although the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan has been widely perceived as a show of strength, it has drawn attention to a major Soviet weakness—a growing dependence on foreign grain. The decision by President Carter to embargo grain imports to the Soviet Union underlined this vulnerability. The harsh reality is that the Soviet Union, once a leading grain exporter, is losing the capacity to feed itself.

Historically, the U.S.S.R. was the breadbasket of Europe. As recently as the late 1930's, net grain exports from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe averaged 5 million tons a year—exactly the same as those from North America. Since then, the food balance has slowly shifted and the Soviet Union has become a food-deficient country. During the mid-1970's, grain imports by the Soviet Union averaged 9 million tons a year; by the end of the decade, they had climbed to some 20 million tons a year. The Soviets had originally planned to import 34 million tons in 1980—the largest amount in the history of any country.

The Soviet agricultural problem is twofold, with each part compounding the other. They have inherited a relatively poor piece of agricultural real estate, and they have designed an agricultural system that is close to being the worst imaginable. Agriculture in the U.S.S.R. is handicapped by low rainfall and a short growing season. The shortage of well-watered, fertile land is a handicap, but not an insuperable obstacle. It might explain why the Soviet Union is not the leading food exporter, but it is not a sufficient explanation of why it is importing so much grain. Japan, for example, is also poorly endowed with agricultural resources, yet with 3 million hectares of land in grain, it manages to satisfy the needs of its 110 million people for rice, and have some left over for export. The Soviet Union, with 260 million people, has 122 million hectares in grain.

The more serious problem facing the U.S.S.R., and the one it appears least able to cope with, is the inefficiency of its agricultural system. The key link between the efforts of people who work the land and the reward for those efforts is weak. Soviet agricultural collectives and giant state farms do not begin to approach the productivity of the family farm system that dominates Japanese and U.S. agriculture.

A group of young American farmers, who recently returned from living on Soviet collective farms on an exchange program, were amazed to see workers leave their tractors promptly at 5 o'clock, regardless of the circumstances. Planting could be weeks behind schedule or a harvest could be threatened by a coming storm, it made little difference. The mentality was that of factory workers leaving their shifts, not that of farmers. This would never happen in Kansas or Iowa. Farmers in the United States would, if necessary, work around the clock to get their corn or soybeans planted. Everyone—husband, wife, and any children old enough to handle the equipment—would take a turn.

The lack of deep personal ties to the land has also led managers of state and collective farms to exploit the soil in order to meet short-term production quotas and advance their own careers. The widespread loss of topsoil and the associated loss of inherent productivity may help to explain why returns on the heavy investment in agriculture are so disappointing. Thane Gustafson, a Soviet scholar at Harvard, explains that Soviet efforts to expand food production must now reckon with "50 years of neglect that have left a legacy of badly damaged soils."

The combination of a relatively poor agricultural resource endowment and one of the most inefficient agricultural systems yet devised helps explain the failure of Soviet agriculture. It virtually guarantees a gap between food consumption and agricultural output. The factory-style organization of agriculture into state farms and large collectives may sound like a good idea, but it does not work very well. Karl Marx was a city boy, and his origins are evident in the shortcomings of Soviet agriculture.—LESTER R. BROWN, *President, Worldwatch Institute, Washington, D.C. 20036*