

PERSPECTIVE...

Russia's Agricultural Crisis

EDWARD CRANKSHAW, author of "Cracks in the Kremlin Wall"

WHETHER IN 1928, when Russia's first Five-Year Plan was launched, the peasant economy would have developed by natural means, by the law of supply and demand, fast enough to feed the new towns adequately we shall never know. It was not given the chance to try. Quite plainly it would have meant allowing the able and ambitious to set the pace, expand their holdings, and employ the less able and ambitious as laborers. This, indeed, the kulaks had already started doing, with the result that by 1928 Soviet agricultural production had recovered from the disasters of civil war and revolutionary chaos and achieved an all-time record. The revolutionaries did not like the smell of it. Lenin himself had said: "Peasant small-scale production breeds capitalism and a bourgeoisie—every day, every hour—by a natural process and on a mass scale."

And so, to protect the Revolution from the rise of a new class of individualistic landowners and to squeeze food from the peasants in return for practically nothing at all, the collectivization was pushed through in what amounted to a disguised civil war. The result of the collectivization was not to increase agricultural production but to depress it in a highly spectacular manner. The depression was so unimaginably disastrous that ten years later, on the eve of the war, although the population had largely increased, agricultural output in general and the livestock population in particular still lagged behind the 1928 level. There was less grain per head of population than there had been in 1928. There were fewer animals than in 1928.

The calamity of the war threw everything into confusion. Millions of acres of crops were wasted; millions of animals were killed. On top of this the collective system was breaking down everywhere. It took the Kremlin five years to restore some sort of order (the 1946

famine in the Ukraine was a terrible setback at the beginning of this task). Then, in 1950, Khrushchev's "Third Revolution" was announced.

It did not work. Nor did the grandiose cattle-breeding scheme. Nor did the Lysenko scheme for temporary pastures. And all the time the towns were clamoring for more and more varied food. One of Malenkov's first actions was to try to get the peasants on his side. But although Malenkov's concessions must have seemed spectacular inside the Kremlin, and liable to threaten the whole basis of Communism, they were not enough. And, in spite of his attempt to switch a part of heavy industry into making consumer goods, there were still not enough goods to tempt the peasants to work harder within the framework of the collectivization.

Because of its insane pretensions as a global power, because of its preoccupation with spreading Communism abroad, the Kremlin has immensely added to its task. It is trying to carry out the traditional development from simple arable to complex mixed farming while, at the same time, diverting vast acreages and resources to the so-called industrial crops and cutting itself off from the free supply of agricultural machinery from abroad. It is, in a word, carrying out an industrial revolution and trying to carry out an agricultural revolution (both by decree), while existing in what can only be called a voluntary state of siege.

One thing is certain: If production cannot be increased, and soon, it will mean the beginning of the end of Soviet Communism. For, in the last resort, the agricultural crisis is not about food; it is about a theory—a theory which heaps suffering on everybody but the men who hold it. (*Excerpts from "Russia's Calamity" by Edward Crankshaw. Printed in Atlantic, May 1955. Reprinted by permission of the copyright owner.*)