

Plenum shows upheaval in rural Russia

by Rachel Douglas

The debates at the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee Plenum of March 15-16 painted a starker picture than ever before, of the crisis in Soviet agriculture. Its collapse is the backdrop to Moscow's extraordinary grab for grain, reported on p. 14. Destitution in the Soviet countryside will impel the Soviet empire to reach increasingly abroad, by concession or by force, for what it cannot provide itself.

General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachov, in the main report to the plenum, said that Soviet food shortages were so grave as to "generate not merely criticism, but actual discontent." He and other officials made clear that the rural crisis encompasses not only the horrendous losses of foodstuffs due to poor infrastructure (equal, in the case of grain, to the total amount imported from abroad), and the poor yields that result from inadequate levels of technological input, unevenly applied. It has also brought a great upheaval in the rural population, especially in the Russian Republic (R.S.F.S.R.) and Ukraine.

An official of Gosagroprom, the four-year-old state agro-industrial authority that the plenum resolved to disband, told TASS on March 13 about "a decrease of 6 million hectares in the areas sown to grain crops in the country over the past three years." The total area under grain crops in 1986, according to a Soviet statistical yearbook, was 116.5 million hectares, so this means a reduction of the area under grain crops, of 5% in the space of three years.

At the plenum, Gorbachov said that 22 million hectares of previously cultivated land have been lost during the past 25 years. Soviet statistics record a stagnating level of land under cultivation:

	Millions of hectares
1960	203.0
1970	206.7
1980	217.3
1985	210.3

Gorbachov's figure means, therefore, that the area of land abandoned or built over has practically cancelled out the area brought under cultivation through land reclamation. The 22 million hectares lost equals over 10% of the total land under cultivation in the U.S.S.R. a quarter of a century ago.

Population flees

"In the last eight years," R.S.F.S.R. Prime Minister A. Vlasov told the plenum, "4.5 million people have left the Russian countryside, and every year around 3,000 rural settlements disappear from the map of Russia."

Four and a half million people is approximately 10% of what the rural population was in 1980! A human migration of that magnitude inevitably is feeding turmoil in the cities of Russia. The numbers help to make sense of the crime wave reported for some cities, and of reports that have surfaced as "human-interest" journalism. The weekly *Ogonyok* carried a feature story on homeless people living in the railway terminals of Moscow, among them whole families from the countryside.

The R.S.F.S.R.'s loss of 10% of its rural population in less than a decade, or over 1% per year, is matched in Ukraine. There, according to a December 1988 report in *Izvestia*, a typical village in Kirovograd Oblast had 324 households and 937 people 25 years ago, and today only 253 households and 725 people—a decline of 23% in the rural population in 25 years.

"I do not wish to arouse passions," said Gorbachov, "but it ought to be said, nevertheless, that the situation is so grave in many regions, that people are deserting the land, moving out of villages. Migration of the rural population has reached a critical level in several regions of the country."

One reason is the utter failure of infrastructure and services. Again, Gorbachov: "Lack of good roads is a problem in all regions. It is a sheer disaster in the Non-Black Earth belt. [*Izvestia* reported March 21 that as of 1988, only 6.2% of on-farm roads and little more than half of the general roads in the R.S.F.S.R. were paved.] Provision of the countryside with well-appointed housing, communal services, schools, medical, and cultural institutions is beneath criticism. Sometimes one has to travel scores and even hundreds of kilometers to get the most urgent things done—receive medical assistance, benefit by elementary services or buy basic necessities."

Health Minister Yevgeni Chazov intervened at the plenum with a report on horrible health conditions in the rural areas. According to *Pravda*, he "recalled that there was a time when people went from the town to the country for their health. Now it is the other way round." Chazov "dwelt on the state of the material and technical base of health care in the countryside, the turnover of medical staff, and the low standard of health and hygiene in the countryside. We are adopting decisions on the provision of gas and heat supplies to the country—they can only be welcomed. But let us give the rural dweller good quality drinking water first of all. After all, at present only 36% of the rural population have a good quality central water supply."

Nineteenth-century productivity

The plunge of land cultivation and rural inhabitants con-

stitutes an absolute shrinkage of the Soviet farm sector. Unlike in the United States, where the historical decline in the farm population was associated with rising productivity due to the application of new technologies, the drop in the Soviet rural population has gone hand in hand with stagnation or decline in productivity.

On March 11 and 12, *Izvestia* correspondent A. Pushkar described a visit to several villages in the Non-Black Earth zone of the Russian Republic. Since it was Chern Region in Tula Oblast (Province), south of Moscow, where the 19th-century writer Ivan Turgenev set his *Sportsman's Sketches*, Pushkar drew a comparison of conditions today with those of a century ago.

Of the 25 collective farms and state farms in Chern, Pushkar reported, officially 7 and in reality 18 are "weak." Turgenevo village had 450 children in the local school before World War II. Today there are 50. "The dilapidation of its farmsteads, the crowdedness of the local store, the club in a rotting hut all cry out: It is time to repay debts to the countryside." At the same time, however, the sight of a huge junkyard of rusting farm machinery and "a mountain of mineral fertilizers in tattered bags, not covered even by straw" make the writer think that the rural inhabitants themselves owe some debts.

At Bezhin Lug (Meadow), site of one of Turgenev's stories, the village consists of 18 households with 29 residents. The collective farm to which it belongs, Pushkar is told by the locals, "built an irrigation system, spending around R100,000, then for no good reason failed to complete it and wrote it off." Thanks to damage inflicted on the meadow by use of the wrong sort of machinery, hay production has plummeted. In the old days, when the peasants were cutting the hay by hand with scythes, they mowed five or six stacks by hand; last summer, the machines cut only one haystack.

When the villages were consolidated into a single collective farm, in 1951, the directors began to close down schools, shops, and services in the villages that lacked promise. "They built no housing in the central farm, and the youth began to flee: first to Tula and Moscow, and then they would take the bus to neighboring Mtsensk, where [two factories] were built, which sucked up youth like a vacuum cleaner."

The farm went through nine different directors. Today, it averages a yield of 13 centners of grain per hectare, while the peasants in the old days would get 16 centners of rye from a *desyatina*. (1 ha = 2.45 acres; 1 *desyatina* = 2.7 acres.)

Dairy productivity has crashed. This farm's cows gave 2,076 liters of milk each, last year. In the United States, cows give 5-6,000 liters. But never mind America, says Pushkar; even locally in Chern, nobody will keep a private cow that doesn't produce at least 4,000 liters. What's wrong in Bezhin Lug? "We've grown old. Look who's working with the cattle. Just old ladies with their gnarled hands. The youth doesn't want to stay on the farm. There aren't enough tractor drivers, either."

'No miracles' seen in Argentine shakeup

by Cynthia R. Rush

A few hours before he was scheduled to get on a plane for Washington to attend the International Monetary Fund's Interim Committee meeting, Argentine Finance Minister Juan V. Sourrouille handed in his resignation to President Raúl Alfonsín. The rest of his economics team quickly followed suit. The March 31 resignation, which caused some surprise in Buenos Aires, occurred after Eduardo Angeloz, presidential candidate of the ruling Radical Civic Union (UCR), publicly suggested to Alfonsín that "this could be the occasion to replace Minister Juan Sourrouille and his economic team." Angeloz charged that Sourrouille had been incapable of controlling the exchange rate, which has seen the national currency, the austral, plummet on the free market from 17 to 53 per U.S. dollar in less than two months.

Presidential spokesman José Ignacio López explained that Sourrouille's resignation was unrelated to the current presidential race. But most on-the-scene observers agree that the move is an electoral ploy, designed to improve Angeloz's image, 30 days before the May 14 elections. Angeloz has tried to distance himself from Sourrouille's economic policies, which have produced chaos on financial and exchange markets, maintained prohibitively high interest rates, and caused inflation to soar. The inflation rate for March is expected to be 15%, with rates of 17-20% predicted for April.

The April 1 *Washington Post* lamented Sourrouille's departure, characterizing his team as "one of the most professionally trained and enduring economic management teams in Latin America." However the *Post* was the only one sorry to see the technocrats go. Peronist presidential candidate Carlos Menem remarked that the minister's resignation was long overdue. So great is the hatred for Sourrouille's boys among the population, that Harvard-trained Finance Secretary Mario Brodersohn, the cold-blooded budget slasher who has denied funding to bankrupt provinces, was nearly assaulted a few weeks ago by irate citizens as he walked down a Buenos Aires street.

Sourrouille's replacement, 74-year-old Juan Carlos Pugliese, is the president of the House of Deputies, a respected political figure. Although he announced that he could offer "no miracles," he moved immediately to calm financial markets and assuage the anger of exporters and importers by devaluing the austral by 21%, and establishing a fixed rate of 20 australs to the dollar, down from the official rate of 15.8.