

Preface

Russia belongs among those countries that are the most vulnerable to climate variability due to unfavorable natural conditions. This, together with a weak agricultural sector as well as poor mechanisms of social insurance, has frequently resulted in crisis situations. During the last hundred years the country has faced numerous severe droughts that have affected its major agricultural zones. In some years, food shortages affected the whole country. Mass famine occurred in the years of political instability in the 1920s, as well as in the 1930s and 1940s.

From the 1960s, the Soviet Union made great efforts to raise its food consumption standards. Unfortunately, the country slipped into the category of being a chronic food importer. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet Union was the largest grain importer in the world. After the breakup of the USSR in 1991, the fall in purchasing power of the population of the former Soviet Union lowered grain and meat consumption, reducing imports in terms of absolute amounts. However, the share of food imports still reaches about 30 percent of the total requirement because of the dramatic decline in the country's own agricultural production. Due to the decline in the livestock sector, comparable only with the decline during World War II, the country now has a grain surplus, allowing some exports in the last few years. However, if the livestock sector were to grow again and the income of the Russian people were to rise in the near future, grain production in Russia would hardly be able to meet domestic demand even in favorable years.

This is the subject of the present historical analysis. Why has Russia experienced permanent food problems throughout its more recent history, and is it likely to face food shortages in the future? The country is characterized by large areas of cropland used for cereals—0.47 hectares per person, which is far higher than the world average figure (0.12 ha). Growth in the Russian population was moderate in the second half of

the twentieth century (0.7 percent per annum) but is now showing a small decline. As with most countries of the world, Russia considerably raised the productivity of its croplands between 1950 and 1980 due to the implementation of the technical achievements of the Green Revolution. The country achieved a cereal yield comparable to that of developed countries located in similar geographical regions—for example Canada. The Soviet Union occupied the third place in the world in terms of per capita grain consumption (842 kg). The Soviet agricultural sector had been receiving good state investment for many decades, comparable with that of any Western European countries and the United States. The question therefore arises as to why Soviet agriculture performed as it did, and what the social implications were.

In addition to its academic interest, this book has been written to fill a gap in the information about food problems in the Soviet Union. Historians are, as a rule, interested in the more dramatic food crises that occurred in the Stalin era. However, new historical sources have become available only recently, providing new facts on this area. The materials show, for example, that a mass famine occurred among Russian peasants in 1924, even though this period is regarded as a time of dynamic economic development in Soviet Russia as a result of the New Economic Policy. Even less is known about the food situation in the Soviet Union in the Brezhnev period. Everybody knows that the USSR faced chronic food problems in the 1970s and 1980s, but the scale of these problems, their geographical distribution, chronological extent and correspondence to climate vagaries have still not been investigated. In the historical literature of this period, coverage of food and agriculture issues is even more scarce than in earlier times, because of the suppression of any information about food difficulties in the regions of the USSR in the era of “developed socialism.”

There are two main sources of original information on the subject. In order to reconstruct the performance of the agricultural sector in key agricultural regions of Russia we have relied on the different official statistical reports on agriculture in the Russian Federation that are available for the last hundred years. The question of the reliability of Soviet agricultural statistics is very important and has been studied in the course of this research. Valuable original information on the agricultural policy and food problems of the country have been accessed in the Open Society Archives of the Central European University (Budapest,

Hungary). The archive has a rich collection of materials (including articles from Soviet and foreign papers, and analytical notes from the institute of Radio Free Europe) on agricultural development, food problems, and many other aspects of the history of the USSR in the postwar period (1950–1990).

The available materials and our selected approach mean that our focus is mainly on the major grain-growing regions of the USSR, such as the Ukraine, the North Caucasus, the Volga basin and Western Siberia. In most national republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia the situation, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, was very specific because of national movements and the prevalence of nomadic traditions. Although in some periods these Soviet republics were very problematic in terms of food, they are not reviewed in the same detail here as the traditional agricultural regions of the country.

We would like to express our acknowledgment to colleagues from the Center for Environmental Studies of Kassel University, headed by dr. Joseph Alcamo, who invited us to participate in a project on modeling climate change and its impact on agriculture in Russia. The model indicates that climate change will bring disadvantages for Russia because of more frequent droughts in the main agricultural zone of the country (Alcamo et. al, 2003). This book would not be possible without this project, since initially the plan was to produce a short retrospective review of the difficulties of the Soviet Union related to climate variability but then, as the archive and other materials were accumulated, it developed into much wider research into the development of Russian agriculture. We would also like to express our gratitude to the team at the Open Society Archives for their permanent support and for the provision of research grants.

