

# Changes in the Portrayal of Ukrainian Agriculture 1949-1966.

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Changes in the Portrayal of Ukrainian Agriculture 1949-1966.

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HIS 365

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In *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, the portrayal of agriculture in the Ukraine is covered heavily. Throughout Soviet history, the Ukrainian region has played a major role in economic and political developments. Being one of the naturally richest regions controlled by the Soviet Union, Ukraine was a “breadbasket” for the massive superpower, producing large amounts of grain and corn for distribution domestically and abroad. Being such a large producer of food, the Ukraine was a prime target for collectivization under Stalin and possession of the region was the cause for tension between Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany during the Second World War. According to scholar Robert Sullivant, Ukraine had the largest regional population and the highest economic level of all the rural areas that were collectivized under Stalin, and the close relationship between Khrushchev and the region made the Ukraine a “reservoir” for up-and-coming Soviet leaders.<sup>1</sup>

From 1949 through 1966, the portrayal of Ukrainian agriculture in the Soviet press shows a significant change in that focus shifts from factors impeding or discouraging production under Stalin and the fulfillment of Five Year Plan quotas to a focus on reform and improving production and conditions under Khrushchev and Brezhnev. After Stalin’s death in 1953, destalinization and, to a lesser extent, de-collectivization took root. The press responded accordingly and allowed increasing numbers of reform-minded editorials on the subject to be published, and articles condemning low-producing farmers and accusations of sabotage began to disappear. This expansion of public opinion allowed Ukrainian agriculture to adapt and keep up with global agricultural markets.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Sullivant, *Soviet Politics in the Ukraine 1917-1957* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1962), v-vi.

Ukraine's relationship to the centralized Soviet Union was rocky, with suspicion and cultural tensions on both sides. As outlined by Sullivant, Ukrainian party members were seen by outsiders as moderate and nationalistic, and these suspicions often led to increased pressure on Ukrainian society, including agricultural, industrial, linguistic, and educational spheres in the form of collective farm inspections, quota increases, and Russification in schools and media.<sup>2</sup> After the rise of Khrushchev in 1957, decentralization took root in Ukraine and suspicions loosened considerably, removing a great deal of tension in the Soviet agricultural industry.<sup>3</sup> In 1949, with Stalinism in full swing, major newspapers in the Soviet Union reported heavily on the collectivization of Ukraine and its performance under the Five Year Plans. Articles focused on Ukrainian farming typically emphasized Ukraine's oft-questioned loyalty to the USSR, though in some cases, as shown below, Ukrainian agricultural workers received praise for above-average performance.

In the 1949 editorial titled, "There Must Be No Lagging in Our Industry," the author discussed possibilities of sabotage and wreckers in Ukrainian agriculture. Ukraine had performed below expectations under the Five Year Plan that began in 1949, and the author cited poor local party leadership and western subversive elements as possible causes. The author went on to emphasize the importance of keeping up with projections in Ukrainian collective farms, warning of increased pressure if problems are not remedied.<sup>4</sup> The author's hostility and suspicion is indicative of common public opinions at the time, and demonstrates the tension and suspicions

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 289, 154, 296.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>4</sup> Editorial, "There Must Be No Lagging in Our Industry," *Kommunisticheskaiia Pravda*, January 12, 1949, translated as "There Must Be No Lagging in Our Industry," *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1949): 1.

directed at Ukraine during the Stalinist period. The underperformance of Ukrainian collective farms is further criticized in the editorial, “The Patriotic Duty of the Beet Growers.” In this article, the author noted that the Ukraine is the largest producer of beets in the Soviet Union, and that in 1948 only 62% of the Five Year Plan’s beet projection was completed. The author insisted that as the premier beet producer of the USSR, the Ukraine had a responsibility to lead agricultural production as a shining example of Soviet farming.<sup>5</sup> The author’s emphasis on the fulfillment of future plans shows the focus on mass production and organization under Stalin, and the pressure on the Ukraine to overcome poor weather or geographical conditions in order to meet requirements.

In a letter to Stalin that same year, beet producers on collective farms proposed several changes to the organization of collective farming in the Ukraine aimed toward improving abilities to produce. The workers suggested dividing quotas into units and measuring beet production per hectare rather than measuring the entirety of the Ukraine’s beet crop. Also suggested was the division of provinces within the Ukraine into brigades. These large groups of farmers could have increased organization among agricultural regions and allowed workers to complete more work per capita.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in March of the same year, Cotton producers in Ukraine published a letter to Stalin pledging to produce more cotton in 1949 under the Five Year Plan than had ever been produced in the period before the Second World War. The letter was quickly adopted by just over 1200 collective farms and 91 factories.<sup>7</sup> These letters together demonstrate the fear of missing projections and the need to display enthusiasm for production

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<sup>5</sup> Editorial, “The Patriotic Duty of the Beet Growers,” *Kommunistichiskaia Pravda*, February 12, 1949, translated as “The Patriotic Duty of the Beet Growers,” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 1, no. 6 (Spring 1949): 66.

<sup>6</sup> Ukrainian Collective Beet Farmers, “Letter to Stalin,” *Kommunistichiskaia Pravda*, February 12, 1949, translated as “Letter to Stalin on Beet Production in the Ukraine,” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 1, no. 6 (Spring 1949): 66.

<sup>7</sup> Ukrainian Collective Cotton Farmers, “Letter to Stalin,” *Kommunistichiskaia Pravda*, March 17, 1949, translated as “Letter to Stalin on Cotton Production,” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 1, no. 11 (Spring 1949): 60.

under Stalin. By requesting organizational changes, the beet producers showed the desire to meet quotas and avoid penalties, while the promise to increase cotton production from the cotton farmers shows a desire to win government approval and avoid suspicion.

Not all coverage of Ukrainian agriculture under Stalin carried such dire themes. Workers and administrators who overfilled quotas and outperformed projections often received public honors and recognition, as in the case of a group of collective agricultural workers who were awarded with the Hero of Socialist Labor award, the Order of Lenin, and the Hammer and Sickle medal for high wheat yields, or the Ukrainian Academy for Science professor V. Ya. Yuryev, who received the Order of Lenin for his outstanding selection of grain.<sup>8</sup> The publication of these honors show the government emphasis on productivity, and the worker loyalty that was expected under Stalin, and illustrate the importance of satisfactory performance.

Also supportive of Ukrainian agriculture was a 1952 editorial by travel journalist F.P. Maximov. In his letter, Maximov outlined improvements he observed on various collective farms throughout Ukraine. Cleaner water, better-built wells, better warehouse organization, fewer weeds and cleaner fields were all described by Maximov. He went on to discuss the increased productivity and the higher qualities of crops being produced in the villages, and praised local authorities for overseeing the changes.<sup>9</sup> Maximov's praise of improvements and the quality of life on the collective farms demonstrates public ideas about agriculture and the need to praise socialist endeavors as connected to the improvement of living conditions during the Stalin period.

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<sup>8</sup> Presidium of the USSR, "Decree of Presidium of the Supreme USSR," *Kommunisticheskaja Pravda*, March 22, 1949, translated as "Decree of Presidium of Supreme USSR," *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 1, no. 11 (Spring 1949): 61.

<sup>9</sup> F.P. Maximov, "Letter to the Editor," *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, October 21, 1952, translated as "Improvement of Collective Farm Villages," *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 4, no. 43 (July 18, 1953): 22.

Conversely, the 1957 article by D. Shumsky described problems in grain recently shipped to Moscow from Ukraine. Such self-criticism was common and expected in Stalinist Russia as part of the Communist lifestyle because it shows proletarian integrity. The author described large amounts of green stalks ground into grain shipments and damp loads of grain saturated with water or oil, and cited under preparation for large yields as causes for the ruining grain surplus.<sup>10</sup> At this time, destalinization had entered the public mind, and as a result, the author did not condemn any individuals for subversion or accuse any workers of sabotage to explain the mistakes in grain shipment, but rather sent a stern warning to improve the qualities of future shipments. This demonstrates a turning point in Soviet history, the shift from the cult of the individual and the fear of retaliation for missed projections to an emphasis on legitimate improvement and progress.

Continuing this “thawing” trend, 1960 saw increased optimism and expression of opinion in public spheres. Demonstrating the former, the report “There Will Be No Respite Between Field Operations,” the author, a collective farm administrator, boasted of the recent highly productive season in the Ukraine. The author wrote that sowing and planting had neared completion and that early orchards and crops of grain were growing quickly and healthily.<sup>11</sup> The optimism shown here draws a sharp contrast to the foreboding and accusatory articles and editorials of the Stalinist period, and demonstrates the early phases of the post-Stalin “thaw.” Still reminiscent of the Stalin period through its enthusiastic praise of worker efforts, this text shows change in its omission of state glorification. The emphasis here is on the worker, not the

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<sup>10</sup> D. Shumsky, “Deliver High Quality Grain to the State,” *Pravda*, September 6, 1957, translated as “Deliver High Quality Grain to the State,” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 9, no. 36 (May 14, 1958): 24.

<sup>11</sup> Report. “There Will Be No Respite Between Field Operations,” *Izvestia*, June 3, 1960, translated as “There Will Be No Respite Between Field Operations,” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 12, no. 22 (March 1, 1961): 35.

state. This could be owed to the rise of Khrushchev, who was the former leader of the Ukrainian Soviet and held an agricultural degree. Where Stalin was a philosopher and a writer, Khrushchev was a pragmatic working class leader.

Khrushchev's ascension to power signaled a change for Soviet life that was evident but not necessarily embraced by his opponents, like the stalinist Giuseppe Boffa, who in his 1959 *Inside the Khrushchev Era* sought to explain and condemn the new "liberalised" policies that were promoted by the new regime.<sup>12</sup> In his book, Boffa criticised Khrushchev extensively for distancing the state from Stalin's policies in the now-famous "secret speech" and offered his full support for the strict state control characteristic of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>13</sup> Despite these scathing condemnations of Khrushchev, Boffa commended Khrushchev on for using his experiences in Ukraine and his practical expertise to seek new solutions to Soviet problems.<sup>14</sup>

Demonstrating the new focus on worker issues is a 1960 letter to the editor by one N. Gryzlov in which the author discussed a recent public debate over the monetary compensation of collective farmers in the Ukraine. The author described the benefits of such compensation, like incentivized higher qualities and quantities of crop. Some economists of the time argued that only high-producing farms merited compensation and some public officials had been quoted as saying that "a certain level of development" must be reached to qualify for compensation. The author argued against these ideas and asserted that socialist ideology insisted on compensating all collective farms in the region, due to some farms being hindered by bad harvests, weather conditions, and geographical disadvantages.<sup>15</sup> The publication of this article showing dissent

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<sup>12</sup> Giuseppe Boffa, *Inside the Khrushchev Era*, trans. Carl Marzani (New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1959), 31.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-41.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>15</sup> N. Gryzlov, "All, Or Only the Strong Ones?," *Izvestia*, June 5, 1960, translated as "All, Or Only the Strong Ones?," *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 12, no. 23 (March 1, 1961): 28.

with public officials demonstrates the shift away from Stalinism, the “loosening” of the grip on public opinion and expression, and a deeper understanding of the complexity of Ukrainian issues.

The moderating trend in the Soviet presses would increase throughout the 1960s, and by 1966 several editorials and articles appeared on Soviet newsstands criticizing the administration of agriculture in Ukraine and suggesting reforms. In an announcement published in 1966, the USSR Council of Ministers presented a new procedure for providing credit to Ukrainian collective farms. Out of the need to reorganize financial matters on collective farms, including wages, debt, and credit, the Council decided to transfer collective farms to a direct banking credit system to cover seasonal shortages and poor weather conditions. Both cash advances and short-term credit were introduced to collective farmers, and electrical rates were reduced in rural areas to help facilitate productivity.<sup>16</sup> By issuing such a radical reform (by socialist standards), the Council demonstrates here the shift into reform and restructure from the command economy of the 1930’s, ‘40’s, and ‘50’s. A reform with such capitalistic rhetoric as “credit” and “banking” would have been a death sentence under Stalin, but the shift into improvement after Khrushchev made it possible, if still controversial.

Individuals also proposed reform and voiced dissent over the administration of agriculture in Ukraine. In his article “What Kind of Transportation Facilities Rural Areas Need,” agricultural economist A. Bashkirtsev discussed the need to retire old dump trucks from the shipping industry and to transition to tractor trailers. Bashkirtsev argued that the cost of transporting grain from Kiev to Moscow would be reduced from 17.3 kopecks per kilometer to

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<sup>16</sup> USSR Council of Ministers, “New Procedure for Credit to Collective Farms,” *Pravda*, January 5, 1966, translated as “New Procedure for Credit to Collective Farms,” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 18, no. 1 (June 22, 1966): 31.

12.3 with the transition to large tractor trailers. He also argued that the modernization of shipping methods in the USSR would prevent shortages and increase productivity by 60%, while lowering shipping costs by 20%.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, in a 1966 article two Soviet economists published a criticism of labor resources misused on the state farms of Ukraine. The authors argued that fixed production assets should be higher for rural workers than for industrial workers and that since the end of the Stalinist period attention to agricultural production in the Ukraine had fallen short. The authors outline the economic repercussions of Winter lax periods, like irregularities in the grain market and idle workers due to harvest ends. The authors asserted that the production of farming equipment and facilities need to be increased to facilitate increasing populations in Ukraine as well as increasing high-tech indoor farming.<sup>18</sup> The authors demonstrate here receptivity to solutions and innovation by the Soviet government, continuing an increasing shift away from the restrictions of Stalinism.

By engaging in increasing public criticism and suggestions for reform from 1949 to 1966, authors in the Soviet press show changes in the portrayal of Ukrainian agriculture and agriculture at large. Ukraine had shifted from a suspicious foreign region conspiring for autonomy to a productive contributor with a need for restructuring and improvement. With the removal of old tensions and accusations, Ukraine remained a primary food producing region in the Soviet Union, and enjoyed the full perks of Soviet membership, no longer burdened by resentment and suspicions.

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<sup>17</sup> A. Bashkirtsev, "What Kind of Transport Facilities Rural Areas Need," *Pravda*, January 7, 1966, translated as "Tractor-trailers in the USSR," *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 18, no. 1 (June 22, 1966): 32.

<sup>18</sup> M. Vasilenko and S. Kolesnev, "Problems of the Use of Labor Resources," *Kommunist* 18, January 7, 1966, 65-74, translated as "Problems of the Use of Labor Resources," *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 18, no. 2 (June 22, 1966): 13.

The end of Stalin's reign and the rise of Khrushchev brought an increased tolerance for expressions of public opinion and opened opportunities for creative and innovative solutions to practical difficulties in producing food in Ukraine. Soviet restrictions on personal expression would continue to loosen over the next two decades in all walks of life, allowing agriculture in Ukraine to expand and adapt to a rapidly changing global market. Soviet life was changing after Stalin's death, and the changes reached Ukrainian agriculture in the form of lessened pressure and tensions.

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