

Collectivization and the peasant rebellion



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Collectivization and the Peasant Rebellion

Collectivization was one of Joseph Stalin's policies in addressing the looming decline in food production in the Soviet Union. This policy, implemented from 1928 through 1940, involved the consolidation of farms from individual farmers into collective farms. Because of the collectivization policy, the Soviet Union experienced significant problems as the peasants opposed collectivization and as the government remained adamant in supporting the policy.

Support from the Peasantry

One of the main benefits of the collectivization policy was that the landless peasants would be able to experience significant improvements in their economic situations, especially when considering that the policy provided for increased involvement of the landless peasants in the farm activities. This was the major aspect of the policy that attracted the peasants to provide support for the establishment of collective farms.

Another important consideration is that the collectivization policy was aimed at providing necessary information in order for decision-making at different government levels to be well-grounded. Such information was the main target of the government in controlling the collective farms, with the information being delivered or made accessible to decision-makers in the timeliest manner possible through the centralized structure of the collective farms. This means that the reach/ scope and effectiveness of the centralized collective farms could significantly contribute to the success of the government's efforts in increasing agricultural output. In this regard, it is arguable that one of the advantages of the collective policy was that it made

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decision-making more attuned to the current conditions of the Soviet Union. However, an important consideration is the structure of the Soviet Union - - this influenced how economic information on the collective farms could be disseminated among the decision-makers at the different government levels. For instance, a centralized structure could readily allow for the dissemination of such information through just a singular effort. In the case of a decentralized structure (as was the case of the non-collective farms prior to the implementation of the policy), however, such information would have proven to be difficult to disseminate. This was important to consider, especially amidst the widely implemented combination of centralized and decentralized economic processes within the Soviet Union.[1] The structure of the centralized collective farms would have had to be well-adapted to this (generally) dual nature of the government for it to be utilized fully. From this perspective, if the structure of the centralized collective farms was indeed designed to support such nature, it would have allow decision-makers to be effective at making use of available information.

In a decentralized government as in the case of the farms prior to the implementation of the collectivization policy, a properly configured structure would have allowed for the most appropriate way of allocating of resources. In addition, it would have helped decision-makers in assessing options and in implementing control over a variety of processes. The significance of the structure of the centralized collective farms was greater in the overall performance of the economy of the Soviet Union and its centralized operations. Since decentralization meant that many components produced different sets of information and were likely to make decisions based on such

varying information sets, having centralized structure such as the structure of the centralized collective farms that comprehensively covered the government and the Soviet Union and its needs would have meant great improvements in making decision making among the different components well-organized and in harmony with each other. Having this done would have meant that the Soviet Union would be able to collaborate its efforts, in spite of being decentralized. The challenge, however, was that the different components had different information outputs that did not necessarily conform to each other. The system would have had to make major adjustments to such information-processes before actually being able effectively implement the structure of the centralized collective farms.

Under decentralization, there were a number of advantages that the peasants and government could use of when implementing the centralized structure of the collective farms. For instance, the costs of developing the centralized structure of the collective farms and implementing it were relatively lower than maintaining decentralized farms that could barely support the food needs of the Soviet Union. This was because of the “divided” nature of the system – individual components of the system did not have to cover the entire Soviet Union, but only had to be connected to the system core – Moscow.[2] In addition, the centralized structure of the collective farms in the economic environment of the Soviet Union at the time meant that the system could be customized in such a way that the specific needs of the individual components are addressed in the best possible way. Therefore, through the centralized structure of the collective farms in such a setting, the processes in the different areas were maintained, thereby

theoretically allowing for more efficient production. This, in turn, made the system considerably flexible as some areas could be made to function differently from the rest of the Soviet Union. The centralized structure of the collective farms allowed for more effective implementation of Soviet strategies. Theoretically, it also allowed the government to maintain or improve participation of peasants. Moreover, decision-makers in the different areas, even though having access to information regarding other areas, would still have maintained a sense of responsibility, considering that they were made to perform within their own areas in spite of having better access to the system information. Moreover, the centralized structure of the collective farms had the advantage of being theoretically more reliable. This was because of the use of different systems (or sub-systems) in the different areas. When a problem/ failure occurred in one sub-system, the centralized structure of the collective farms would still remain functional in other sub-systems. The centralized structure of the collective farms also provided for responsiveness among the government offices. It is important to emphasize on the increased motivation/ satisfaction that, theoretically, peasants would have in such a setting - - peasants were theoretically encouraged to participate in processes and have a heightened sense of responsibility. Also, since the theoretically took into consideration the various needs of the different areas and not just those of the entire Soviet Union as a whole, theoretically, the decision-makers in the different areas would have been able to achieve improvements in their response times.

Peasants' Discontent and Its Parameters

The main discontent of the peasants with the policy was that it took away land from peasants who already had land prior to the policy implementation, and it effectively decreased the income of the peasants in spite of the supposed improvements in the economic situations of the peasants. One of the parameters of the peasants' discontent was their freedom to work on their own lands and on lands of their own choosing. The former farm system prior to collectivization is generally associated with democratic societies. This makes sense because the former farm system prior to collectivization required individual freedom and control of resources, properties and means of production. It is arguable that the framework of democracy was the most appropriate for the former farm system prior to collectivization at least at the village level. In contrast, communism and socialism imposed by the collectivization were not typically associated with democracy, especially when considering that communism and socialism prohibits individual ownership and control of the economy's means of production. As a result, the former farm system prior to collectivization could not exist in purely communist or purely socialist economic systems.[3]

It is important to note that the former farm system prior to collectivization was characterized by three main aspects: (a) private ownership, (b) individual economic freedom, (c) competition among farming entities. In terms of private ownership, the entire village accepted and accommodated private ownership. This meant that, in such an economy, resources such as land, as well as the means of production and goods and services were privately owned at the village level by individual members of the society, by

groups or entities like partnerships or families. In terms of individual economic freedom, the former farm system prior to collectivization allowed individual members of the villages to pursue their own interests to achieve certain economic goals. This meant that in such a situation, the individual peasants were allowed and accommodated to act for personal gains. Considering that individuals were free to go for whichever occupation they desired, the former farm system prior to collectivization was frequently referred to as an enterprise system within the socialist Soviet Union.[4] In terms of competition among farming entities, the former farm system prior to collectivization allowed and accommodated individuals and groups to compete against each other. This aspect of the former farm system prior to collectivization was actually an offshoot of individual economic freedom at the village level – people competed against each other because of their desire to accomplish their personal economic interests in a system where resources and, thus, economic opportunities were limited. These three aspects were important factors that contributed to the discontent of the peasants and that distinguished the former farm system prior to collectivization from the collective farming villages upon implementation of the policy.

In the new collective farm structure, there was no individual economic freedom, no private ownership and no economic competition among individuals or groups of individuals. In such an economy, there was no private ownership. The main positive effects of the former farm system prior to collectivization were as follows. It supported individual freedom. It also allowed for individual control of resources and properties at least at the

village level. This prevented the government (or a few individuals) to control economic resources and properties. Overall, the former farm system prior to collectivization was a dominant factor in the Soviet Union's situation during the implementation of the collectivization policy.

In contrast, the new structure of the collective farms entailed economic equality. Peasants were compelled to work, with their efforts ideally being pooled together to be distributed equally among the people. In terms of productivity, the people were theoretically encouraged to be more productive. Socialist and communist strategies (agenda) were similar in that they consider the people as the origin of power. However, they also differ in terms of how such power is utilized and maintained, and in terms of how the people have control of such power once it has already been given to the ruler(s).

The new structure of the collective farms meant that the landed peasants would lose their properties, that the landless peasants would gain access to farmlands but lose their economic freedom, and that the farming villages would be subjected to the control of Moscow, mainly for the benefit of the densely populated cities of the Soviet Union. The new structure of the collective farms also meant that, with the aim of increasing overall economic efficiency, there was the very realistic risk of the government making reduced payments to the peasants in spite of the peasants increased agricultural output.

Uprising Effectiveness, Expectations of Peasants and Overall Outcome

The peasant uprising was effective in the sense that it effectively counteracted the collectivization policy. For instance, the Soviet Union as a whole experienced decreased agricultural output because the peasants refused to the work in the farms.[5] This is completely opposite the initial goal of the collectivization policy, which is to increase agricultural output to support the growing demand of the Soviet Union, especially in urban areas where populations were concentrated.[6] One of the main reasons for the effectiveness of the uprising was that the peasants' expectations of maintained or increased income were not met by the collective farms. In fact, many of the peasants experienced decreased income because of the collectivization policy.[7]

The result of such failures can be observed in the situation of the Soviet Union by the late 1930s. For instance, large-scale collectivization and the reaction of the peasants resulted in major changes in the effectiveness of Soviet Union's institutions especially at the level of the villages. Such collectivization policy did not necessarily have the power or strength to be successful at being effective, in spite of the fact that the policy was supported, theoretically, by the socialist economic system that framed the economic activities of the villages in general.[8] In fact, the results of the collectivization policy indicate that such policy was met with significant opposition, such that support for the collectivization policy was utterly uncommon throughout the Soviet Union in spite of the outright and well-known mandate of the government for the establishment of the collective farms.

The opposition exhibited by the peasants in the villages can be considered akin to the Soviet Union's transition into a state where small democratic institutions are accommodated at the village level. Democratic movements have been making some progress at the time, but they are still weak against the large communist government.[9] In addition, perhaps more importantly, the actions of the Soviet Union's government actually resulted in attention being shifted towards the government and its policies and actions.[10] This led to increased criticism of the Soviet Union government and the policies it implemented. However, movements against the communist autocracy were very difficult, in spite of the large scale refusal of the peasants to work in the collective farms. Thus, this implies that the problems experienced by the Soviet Union during the collectivization of the farms were attributable to the Soviet Union's nature of government. Such problems were very complex and difficult to address by way of movements or activities similar/ related to the collectivization.[11]

In this regard, the overall outcome of the peasant uprising was the decline of agricultural production of the Soviet Union and the eventual failure of the collectivization policy. It should be noted that the Russian communist government was the principal reason behind the difficulty in addressing problems of autocracy and problems in sustaining the collectivization policy. For instance, in spite of changes in power distribution within the Russian government, the communist central government remained strong and powerful in addressing challenges and oppositions.[12] The Russian communist government actually had not changed much in terms of influence and thus remained the major obstacle to any democratic move or any move

that counters the Russian communist government's initiatives and decisions, even at the lowest levels of the villages.

Because of this maintenance of power, the central government was able to impose restrictions on the population even when such restrictions were against the desires of the peasantry. For instance, by controlling the farms at the village level, the Russian central communist government believed that it would be more able to control localities and effectively implement reforms for growth, especially in the agriculture and food supply.[13] Because of its power and the lack of strength of opposition, the central government readily and extremely limited the population in spite of changes in the economic conditions throughout the country. Such strength and apparent lack of flexibility undermined the growing problems linked to the peasant uprising. As a result, the inflexibility of the Russian government contributed to the eventual failure of the collectivization policy.

Nonetheless, in spite of the power and oppression that the government exerted on the people in the villages, it was actually suffering from unapparent problems in maintaining central control as well as discipline, especially among the communities involved in the collectivized farms.[14] This made Moscow prone to problems in maintaining the system of government throughout the country, which, in turn, made the government unable to properly, completely and effectively enforce the collectivization policy. This also points out that need for Moscow then to examine large-scale and comprehensive reforms and their effects on the economy.

An important part of the situation of the Soviet Union during and immediately after the implementation of the collectivization policy was the transformation of the Russian communist government into a major facilitator of the reform.[15] This is important because the Russian government did not properly accommodate the expectations and needs of the peasantry. There was no effective means of establishing a system that checks and balances on all institutions involved in the collectivization policy, such that there were conflicts of interests among the different offices involved in the collectivization policy, as well as between the government and the peasantry in general. The Russian communist government was then already trying to transform itself into an entity that is more understandable and acceptable to the population through the collectivization policy, which undoubtedly attempted to consider the needs of the growing population as well as the needs of the landless peasants.[16]

Another principal consideration for Soviet Union's reforms was its legal system at the time of the implementation of the collectivization policy. In the past, the actions that were made in this system were practically determined by the central government. Thus the system was able to deeply enroot itself into the Russian society. The negative things about this characteristic of the government was that, under communist totalitarian government, power was unlimited, party power was permanent, and the leader's power was indivisible.[17] In addition even if the Russian communist government took on a reversal of action, this would not mean any change in the totalitarian power structure. Such inflexibility, as mentioned earlier, contributed to the eventual failure of the collectivization policy.

Because of its strong persistence even to the late 1930s and after the failure of the collectivization policy, this central autocracy had to be dealt with if the country was to sustain its economic pace through reforms in the legal system. The historical task that faced Soviet Union was to create a society under the rule of law, in spite of the increased economic lawlessness of the peasants who refused to work in the collective farms. The path to such a society was a legal one, not an illegal one.[18] However, courts were not independent.[19] There still needed to be some big struggles to be faced in order for the system to be changed in favor of economic and socio-political reform for the benefit of the population. This was important because the legal path was an effective method of struggle towards properly addressing the needs of the Soviet Union.[20] It should be noted though that, in spite of apparent stagnancy and decline resulting from the collectivization policy, the Russian legal system has already exhibited significant changes alongside the decline of the economy upon implementation of the collectivization policy. [21]

All these emphasize the complexity that the Russian government actually faced in trying to mold the Soviet Union into a growth-conducive society. Regarding the nature of Soviet Union's system of corruption, it is important to note that corruption was built into the fabric of Russian society such that removing it would have resulted in problems at the basic levels of government and public service.[22] Thus, there was a compelling case that essentially establishes that, probably, to some extent, the Soviet Union would have had to continue addressing the need for growth-conduciveness

without actually eliminating corruption and peasant opposition comprehensively at such a large-scale.

Analysis and Conclusion

Regarding the establishment of collective farms in Russian villages, the problems faced by the Russian government was on the autocracy and the delegation of “ power” to the villages through to ensure proper implementation of collectivization.[23] Through collectivization, the village people are deprived of their power and are compelled to give up their properties for the benefit of populations that the government considered fit for allocation of the produce from such properties. By the end of the 1930s, the country already had large scale implementation of collectivization in villages throughout all its territory. However, in spite of the general interest that such an implementation has gained from critics and analysts around the world, the Russian government was actually having problems with the implementation.

The principal issues to consider in the implementation of collectivization in the Soviet Union were as follows: (1) whether or not this collectivization policy would influence lawlessness and rebellion exhibited by villages; (2) whether or not the resulting structure of the collective village farms would function as agents for suppressing village resistance to state initiatives or, on the contrary, as supporters of such resistance; (3) whether or not it is possible to establish a peaceful and beneficial coexistence between the Russian Government and the collective farm structures in the villages; and (4) whether or not the people were actually inclined to accept and participate in the collective farms. In effect, there needs to be an

examination of such issues, especially in terms of the objectives of the policy's implementation and how it was that the resulting collective farm structures in the villages could be established realistically.

The problems and results of the collectivization policy were discussed and analyzed, especially from the perspective of the state government as well as the perspective of the peasants. The bases used for such analysis are considerably robust and makes use of earlier literature on Russian sociology and politics. This paper addresses the issues involved in the implementation and failure of the collectivization policy, with Russian socio-politics as the foundation for the analysis. It is concluded that village opposition and freedom in economic activities was difficult to attain, given the state of government (or lack of it) in the villages at the time the collectivization policy was implemented. However, it was not impossible, especially when considering the economic boom that influenced - even to a small extent - the villages. Overall, the collectivization policy was a failure because it did not consider all of the needs and expectations of the peasants, and because the uprising of the peasants resulted in a decline in agricultural output, which was completely opposite to the agricultural and economic improvement goals of Stalin's collectivization policy for the Soviet Union.

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[17] Ibid, 37.

[18] Jonge, A. 1988. Stalin and the Shaping of the Soviet Union. New York: Free Press.

[19] Ibid, 9.

[20] Ibid, 36.

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[22] Ibid 98.

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