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A Month in the Country

In late August 1989, Mark Kuchment, an economist at Harvard University's Russian Research Center who studies the transfer of medium-level technology such as used in cultivation and food processing, was received in the Moscow office of Vladimir Nikitin, the new First Deputy Prime Minister of the USSR responsible for agriculture. Kuchment had just spent a month investigating farm and food industry management in three rural regions of the Soviet Union, trying to assess the extent of change and, in particular, peoples' reactions to the leaseholding and entrepreneurial reforms approved earlier that year. Nikitin, who had made his career in an oil-producing region, was "conservative but flexible" and learning rapidly." Out of the blue, Kuchment asked: "What are you reading now?" Nikitin answered that he was studying Nehru's letters to Gandhi. What had impressed him most was Nehru's search for an *Indian* way to progress: he couldn't rely on any "readymade" system.

The reform of Soviet agriculture is indeed problematic, says Kuchment. No one course or model has been accepted. The aspirations, practices, and attitudes of bureaucrats and farm workers varied throughout the three regions he visited. This leads Kuchment to find some validity in the compromise policy of preserving collective farming while allowing "new forms" of property where people are ready.

Poltava

Poltava, in the Ukraine, is extremely fertile: as Gogol wrote, if you stuck a pole in the ground here, a carriage would grow. Its collective and state farms are very large, incorporating more than 12,000 hectares. And very rich, thanks to natural abundance, and to a clever local Party secretary, Morgun, who in the 1970s introduced powerful American ploughs and ensured against the pervasive rural labor shortage by attending to the social infrastructure. Good housing and living conditions attract workers. Morgun, now retired, boasted to Kuchment that back when it was illegal for

collective farms to obtain building materials, he'd shielded farm chairmen and obstructed investigations into construction projects. "Whenever I saw a building, I knew that there's a person who could go to jail."

There are no private farmers or lease brigades in Poltava. Local officials are not ardent supporters of radical agricultural reform; they argue that private farming would require unavailable small-scale technology. Changes were, however, taking place in agricultural administration. The local agro-industrial department (APO) director had until recently been appointed from above, but the new one had been elected by the directors of the local state and collective farms and food processing enterprises — one of their own.

The new APO director noted that he must serve local interests if he is to win reelection. The greatest problem in the region was obtaining feed: quality was low, the price high. He pooled local economic resources to build a feed plant to ensure cheap and timely supply. It opened within a year of the election.

Stop Two: Ivanovo

Ivanovo, which lies northeast of Moscow, is an extremely poor region with a severe climate. It has grown from a flax-growing region that supported the textile industry of the eighteenth century into a huge industrial area. Uzbeks were brought in as *kolkhoz* workers in the 1950s as the local agricultural population declined; they have since returned to their warm and sunny republic, leaving behind only their *chaikhanalar* — traditional teahouses — as a reminder of their stay.

Poltava's riches have made it resistant to change. But Ivanovo's poverty has forced its officials to welcome change as a chance for improvement. Individual initiative is more evident: lease brigades are numerous, and some city workers have made efforts to get into farming. The regional Party secretary was skeptical. He wouldn't stand in the way of



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such experiments — “they’re in fashion now,” he told Kuchment — neither would he encourage farm directors to push further. As to private agriculture: “I’ve been to Poland. They never collectivized and they have nothing to eat.”

Kuchment considers infrastructure to be a greater problem than actual production for Soviet agriculture, which lacks processing equipment, trained workers, and a supply and delivery infrastructure. The partial conversion of military plants may help by producing more vehicles, agricultural machinery, and equipment, but it will be a slow process. “Without help from the West, there will not be much improvement.” He did find some successful introductions of western technology. In the south, he saw a field of Iowa hybrid corn. (“There’s just no comparison to the local stuff.”) In Ivanovo, he talked to a collective farm chairman who had recently purchased foreign milk-processing equipment to replace stock dating from 1936. Kuchment also visited a huge chicken farm equipped with Italian technology, where pay is high. Benefits include a heated swimming pool, no small matter in northern Russia.

Faith in western innovations and technology imports offends the rural scientific community. The scientists complain: “They neglect us. We’re just like the USA. We could supply the same things.” Says Kuchment: “You could find Soviet stuff as good or better, but you can’t get it on the scale needed by a *kolkhoz*.”

End of the Line: Latvia

“In Latvia, you feel like you are in a different country,” where agricultural potential is great, and differences between rural and urban life are less pronounced than in the Ukraine or Russia. The Yaunas Kommunards collective farm has a long waiting list of people drawn by the possibility of getting their apartment within about a year of joining. Or they may build their own house; Kuchment saw several high-quality brick and concrete constructions. Good teachers and doctors are paid a bonus in addition to the state wage to work at the farm.

Private farming is strongly encouraged by officials, who see restoration of Latvia’s traditional family farms as an expression of nationalism. The large-scale deportation of Latvians after the country’s incorporation into the USSR also makes land reclamation a must. As of August 1989, however, only 1200 families had applied to lease their own plot. An official at the republic Gosagroprom, the agro-industrial agency, told Kuchment that thirty percent of these people know nothing of farming. Another thirty percent will go bankrupt within two years: “They need knowhow. They have no idea what it means to be a private farmer.”

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Epilogue: Moscow

Winding up his trip in Moscow, Kuchment witnessed a curious policy debate axiomatic of the confusion in Soviet agricultural policy. Reformers Viktor Lishchenko and Nikolai Smelyov and the rural writer Yuri Chernichenko were trying to push through a plan to give farms hard currency credits so that they could deal directly with western manufacturers. This would spur the introduction of vital innovations. The plan had been approved, but the politburo had put it on hold. Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov had reversed this order, but access to the credits was now being blocked without clear authority by Vladimir Nikitin on the grounds that *kolkhoz* executives were not sophisticated enough to deal with western businessmen.

In discussions with officials at various levels, Kuchment encountered clear opposition to breaking up collective agriculture. Unlike the Chinese decollectivization from above, Soviet policies favor encouraging private initiative only where people are ready. This compromise is the product of continual struggle among those who want to privatize agriculture, those who want to reform it while retaining its socialist character, and those who want nothing to change. Kuchment doubts that socialist agriculture will be dismantled altogether. “It’s too early to write off the Soviet Union.”

Reported by Jeff Zelkowitz