



## Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

### Research Report

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**Russia: Moscow and Irkutsk**

***The Soviet Farm Complex: Industrial Agriculture in a Socialist Context, 1946-1965***

#### **Topic of Research:**

The dissertation project is a study of agricultural reform and industrialization in the Soviet countryside after World War II. The reforms the state carried out between 1946 and 1965 were ambitious, inventive, forward thinking and often doomed. My project argues three major points about these reforms: first that the international political and economic context in which Soviet agricultural reform took place is not well understood; yet this context is central to these reforms. For example, after World War II the Soviet Union looked to the United States for ideas about how to rework its agricultural system, then later the U.S.S.R. encouraged poorer nations in the emerging third world to invest in an ideologically "socialist" system of agricultural modernization. Second, the unique environmental contexts in which reforms took place were central to their ultimate success or failure. The relationship between the environment and historical change has often been avoided by historians for fear of being branded environmental determinism, yet taking the historical constraints of the natural world into account is important, especially since Soviet agricultural reform was so

often directed at pushing these limits. Third, I argue that Soviet reforms followed logical if chaotic plans of action. A deeper understanding of the unique logic of Soviet agricultural reform provides insight into their history, and also into the broader history of industrialization and the global implications of modern agriculture.

### **Approach and Methodology:**

I received an IREX IARO fellowship to spend 9 months in Moscow and Irkutsk, Russia to study the history of Soviet agricultural reform in these locations. I spent approximately 7 months working in Moscow and 2 months in Irkutsk. The grant allowed me to perform research in archives and libraries in both locations, and I was able to stick to the schedule I created for myself and complete a large portion of my dissertation research in these 9 months. When I left for Russia in the fall of 2003, I knew I would probably need to make a second trip to Russia and Ukraine in 2005 to complete my research, and this is still my intention. The findings I refer to in this document are therefore preliminary, and reflect only my experiences in Moscow and Irkutsk so far.

### **Research Findings:**

In general, working in the Russian state archives went both better and worse than I had anticipated. For the most part, the archives I worked at (RGAE, GARF and local state archives in Irkutsk) were accommodating places with competent and friendly staff. The listings of the agricultural records that these archives held were typically well described, and about 95% accurate. RGAE in particular has a number of *ukazatel'i*, or narrative guides, to the agricultural holdings that I found very helpful. On the other hand, a complete and accurate written record of Soviet agriculture for this time period simply does not exist. After Khrushchev's bureaucratic restructuring in 1958 a number of agencies drop out of the archival record and to the best of my knowledge, do not reappear within the federal system until the 1970s (most notably the MTS/*Selkhoztekhnika* and the non-RSFSR agricultural experiment stations). In addition, the immediate postwar period (1945-1949) is also filled with gaps. I ultimately changed my project slightly to accommodate the inconsistencies and omissions of the Soviet archival record, rather than lose precious time trying to track down documents that most likely no longer exist.

For the immediate postwar period, I directed my research toward a big-picture question: after the war how did the state re-assert management and control over Soviet territories and over the work of reconstruction in general? In researching this reconstruction phase, I spent much of my time examining the records of the new quarantine stations set up in Ukraine beginning in 1946. These stations had their origins in postwar reconstruction: due to massive disruptions in agriculture, Ukraine received basic food aid from the United States until late 1947. The importation of food to Ukraine made the Soviet state anxious

about the circulation of agricultural goods. The federal Ministry of Agriculture set up quarantine stations in Ukraine to provide a level of surveillance and control over the movement of agricultural products.

My research found that the quarantine stations accomplished several goals of state authority simultaneously, not all of them made public. It was in the Soviet Union's best interests in the years after the war to keep the world guessing as to how much grain it was actually producing, and by carefully controlling import and export records, the Soviet Union managed to thoroughly confuse the outside world regarding its production capacity. Additionally, during the war Ukrainian farmers had reverted to individual production, and between 1945-1949 they were growing potatoes in order to feed themselves, rather than furnishing grain to state authorities. This was an undesirable behavior in the eyes of the state, and by inspecting fields and cargo in the name of agricultural quarantine, the state was better able to assess and control the production and sale of non-grain agricultural commodities. The legitimate and public reason the state gave for the creation of the quarantine system was that the Soviet Union's agricultural production was under threat from foreign insect pests that had arrived in other parts of Europe during the war and caused major crop destruction. My research showed that this public reason was secondary to the other two.

The history of the Soviet state's quarantine stations will be the first chapter of my dissertation, as it will provide historical background on the earlier history of the Soviet countryside as well as providing an interesting case study that touches on a number of major issues I address in my project, such as the antagonistic relationship cultivated between state authorities and rural citizens, the international connections that influenced Soviet agriculture, and the use and abuse of rural bureaucracy for ulterior motives.

Another topic I spent a major amount of time researching in Moscow and Irkutsk was the development of Soviet animal agriculture throughout the 1950s. Although this category usually refers to greater production of pigs, sheep, cows and other livestock, I discovered that the Ministry of Agriculture also placed a heavy emphasis on hunting and trapping as well as the domestication of historically wild species such as reindeer and seals. In Irkutsk, I found the records of a number of hunting *kolkhozii* whose members earned money by hunting sables in the winter as well as by farming in the summer. A farm family could double or even triple their annual income by working for a two-week period in the winter hunting sable and squirrels. Irkutsk lies at the northern edge of the Virgin Lands Campaign, and as an extreme environment for agriculture the adaptations and accommodations the state made in order to make agriculture work there were simply enormous.

In addition to producing more animals, Soviet agricultural researchers also tried to create bigger and better animals by improving stock through selective breeding. Western scientists often accused soviet breeders of copying hybrid crosses that had been developed in the west and announcing them as original Soviet inventions. In the absence of a formal state genetics program, this might indeed have been the most practical way for Soviet animal breeders to improve

their stock. While I was in Moscow, I examined the records of a number of animal breeding stations located throughout European Russia and Ukraine. The Moscow archive is exceptionally thick and rich in its records of the crosses and lineages that these breeding stations made. I focused my research on pigs and cows and tried to figure out if the Soviets were indeed simply reverse engineering their hybrid animals, or if the breeds they created were both unique and enduring. Soviet breeders also had enormous problems improving certain qualities of their livestock, and struggled for years with challenges such as increasing milk fat percentage and litter size and decreasing the age at which animals reached maturity. In these somewhat mundane problems of animal agriculture, I see the state struggling to adapt pre-industrial animals (that is, breeds and crosses that had been developed before agriculture became industrialized) to an industrial system of workers, facilities, and feeding regimes. Their limited success at this task signals not just a failure on the part of the Soviet state, but also a victory on the part of the animals and the old-fashioned system that produced them.

The last topic of my dissertation that I was able to research in-depth during my time in Russia was the relationship of the Soviet Union to the so-called Third World that emerged during the cold war. I was lucky in my second month of research to discover the records of agricultural development work and technical assistance that the Soviet Union carried out in Indonesia, Ghana, Somalia and a number of other countries between 1960-1965. These records include narrative reports from the chief engineers and officers on the projects, and are remarkably candid exposés of the problems and challenges of the work these international projects faced. Very little has been written about the role that the socialist Second World played in creating the Third World. Since agricultural self-sufficiency and modernization are large themes in both the history of the Soviet Union and the history of the Third World, this topic is a natural one with which to conclude my project, and this will be the last chapter of my dissertation. My major findings on this topic show that the problems Soviet specialists encountered while working on agricultural projects abroad were often quite similar to the problems they had encountered domestically just a few years earlier. This did not mean that the Soviet state was skilled at responding to these challenges. The distance between Moscow and foreign sites and the centralized chain-of-command that governed most decisions in foreign assistance proved to be major obstacles. While agriculture reform within the Soviet Union itself yielded mixed results in the postwar period, the Soviet Union's foreign agricultural assistance programs were a decided failure.

### **Future Research:**

The IREX IARO grant provided me with the time and resources to complete about 2/3 of the total research I need to do for this project. In the coming year, I will visit archives and libraries in the United States, and make at least one and possibly two short trips back to the FSU in order to complete my project. I still

need to visit archives in Ukraine that hold the records of individual quarantine stations, as well as the agricultural research station where Lysenko worked in Odessa. Although my project is a history of agriculture across the entire Soviet Union in the generation after World War II, the regional study I made in Irkutsk provided my project with a level of detail and insight that national-level records just do not hold. Therefore, I plan to make a similar trip to Kharkiv Oblast in Ukraine to read through local documents there. Irkutsk Oblast, in Siberia, was a study of a marginal environment and exposed some of the greatest challenges that the Soviet Union faced in its reforms. Kharkiv Oblast, by contrast, is an agriculturally rich region that was rebuilt and industrialized rapidly after the war. As such, I hope that it will illustrate a region of promise and potential, and an area in which the Soviet Union experienced more success than frustration. I anticipate finishing my dissertation in the spring of 2006.