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**Cockroaches, 'X-Men' and the "Black Day":
Food Security and the Russian Federation**
Dr Steven J Main



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Key Findings

- Russia has a very involved and complex relationship with the food it produces and imports. The lack of food, as well as its actual production, has been the cause of much political and social turbulence even in its recent past.
- Russian policy makers clearly perceive food security as an integral part of its overall national security agenda – an infringement on the former being viewed as an attack on the latter.
- Production of many basic food items has still not fully recovered from the “period of adaptation” of the 1990s. Russian grain production is still variable and seasonal and undermines Russia’s attempts to become food secure.
- Given the geographical size of Russia, climate change may hinder agricultural production in some areas, but help it in others.
- Central government has not played its historically very important role in being one of the key players in maintaining and developing Russia’s agricultural system; only recently, has central government attempted to rectify this neglect.
- As food, globally, becomes ever more important, could Russia be on the brink of being able to use food as a future agent of influence, or will the state, once again, feel the political impact of Russians not receiving “their daily bread”?

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"The cockroaches swarmed over the kitchen at night. Whenever I went there for a drink of water late in the evening and turned on the light, the entire floor, the big bench and even the wall were almost solid brown and astir with them...At night when Matryona was already asleep, but I was busy working at the table, the thin, quick pattering of mice under the wallpaper merged with and drowned out the rustle of the cockroaches behind the partition, like the distant sound of the ocean. But I grew accustomed to them, There was nothing evil about either the mice or the cockroaches, and they told no lies. Their rustling was simply for them their life." (A Solzhenitsyn, "Matryonin's House", 2nd edn., University of South Carolina Press, 1971, 67).

"And where have all the cockroaches disappeared to? In Moscow, there are significantly less of them around, perhaps, unlike the rats, they haven't grown used to the new poisons? In actual fact, research has shown that the number of young types of cockroach has declined from generation to generation but the reason, apparently, for this would seem to lie elsewhere. According to one version, the cockroaches are dying out because of changes in food products – they cannot eat the genetically modified food." (B Stepovoi, "Krysy nauchilis' ezdit' na liftakh i poezdakh", *Izvestiya*, 17/12/2007).

Anyone who has ever had the "pleasure" of staying in any communal residence in the USSR/Russia in the not too distant past can easily relate to the truth of the quote from Solzhenitsyn's short story, *Matryonin dvor*. As a matter of course, it was always advisable to switch the light on at least five minutes before entering whatever room you *had* to enter at night, in order to give the cockroaches time to scuttle away and you the chance of avoiding seeing something that you didn't really want to see!

But, like the man in Solzhenitsyn's story, over time, you became less and less bothered by the scurrying cockroaches, until you simply stopped "seeing" them and then stopped thinking about them altogether. You learned to live with them, they could do you little, if any, harm and, at the end of the day, they had been a part of Russian society for centuries and, as far as we knew, were to be part of Russian society for centuries to come. However, there would

now appear to be some evidence that they are fast disappearing and, if the thesis advanced by the second author, turns out to be correct, their disappearance could well be a sign of something drastically going wrong in the Russian food chain (rather than, for example, an indication of a vast improvement in the general cleanliness of Russian public living conditions).

The disappearance of the cockroaches, in itself, would be worthy of much more careful examination, but this is not a natural history scientific research paper and is, therefore, not the appropriate place for such an examination to be undertaken. This paper is an examination of the background, the concept and the reality, as well as the wider national and international implications, of what is a highly complex and involved topic: Russian food security.

Anyone with any knowledge of Russia's turbulent history of the last century, will be aware of the fact that food, or the lack of, was one of the main causes of two violent revolutions, as well as the reason behind much unnecessary death in a number of regions in Russia – and Ukraine - in the 1920s and 1930s. As shown by the food crisis of 2008, this is like a spectre which can still exert an influence on Russia on a different level from that experienced in Western Europe, never mind the United States. The production of Russia's daily bread is much, much more than simply an economic, or a production, issue: given the country's history, as well as its political and economic development and its own internal security environment, successive regimes in power in the Kremlin have known for centuries that if there's one thing that will stir the masses from their slumber, it is, contrary to the words of the Lord's Prayer, not getting their "daily bread". Many Russian policy makers, both past and present, know full well the truth behind the Russian saying: "the less of bread, the more of politics."

Definition

Given the nature of the topic, it would be practical and helpful if we had a clearer understanding of what is meant by the term, "food security", (usually translated into Russian by the phrase, *prodovol'stvennaya bezopasnost'*, *bezopasnost'* being the usual Russian word for "security"). The phrase, in English, has been variously described, but the standard English definition of the term appears in the UN Rome Declaration of 1996:

“food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”¹

As a working definition, this is concise, accurate and reflects many, if not all, the areas normally associated with the term, “food security.” A few years after the Declaration of the World Food Summit – from whence the definition appeared – a book appeared in Russia, entitled, Russia in the global food security system (M.1999). Co-authored by the then deputy chairman of the Russian *duma*’s Security committee, P T Burdukov, the book examined the whole issue of Russia in the world food market and has influenced the debate in Russia on this issue ever since. The timing of the appearance of the book was not accidental: Russia was still recovering from the financial crisis of the preceding year and this is partly reflected in the general “feel” of the work. The work did attempt to examine the complexity of the issue within a Russian, as well as world, context. Consciously, or otherwise, the book attempted to place the whole food security issue high on Russia’s security agenda.

Given the crisis nature to the backdrop of the book, the definition that the authors used throughout the work is a mixture of food “independence”, as well as food “security”, with a partial pinch of food “safety”, as well! Thus, their definition seems confused, mixing up both “security” and “independence” and, indeed in Russian, the word they use is the normal political word for “independence”, *nezavisimost’*. They are very strongly of the opinion that sovereignty and food security are very much linked and that an infringement of one is an infringement of the other. For instance, in the opening couple of pages of the work, the “independence” aspect of the definition is very much to the fore:

“in Russia, the legal base is lacking ensuring the security of its citizens from famine and [guaranteeing] the state’s independence, [leaving] the possibility [open] of political blackmail, due to the lack of food...Concerning the food security of an individual country, this usually means a state of defensiveness, concerning meeting the demand for food by its own means and in the necessary quantities, ensuring the normal, daily activity and progressive development of the individual, society and the state.”²

Slightly further on in their work, both authors, quoting the contemporary examples of Iraq and Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), underline the importance of maintaining domestic agricultural production at levels sufficient to counter the potentially disastrous consequences of over-reliance on food aid/imports from abroad:

¹<http://www.fao.org/develop/003/w3613ee.00.htm>

² P T Burdukov, R Z Saetgaliyev, Rossiia v sisteme global'noi prodovol'stvennoi bezopasnosti, (M.1999), 1-42; 16-17, (<http://www.duel.ru/publish/burdukov/glob.html>)

“the threat to food security arises in those circumstances when the political, economic, foreign policy and other conditions are so created which lead to a disruption of the [internal] food supply, thereby threatening the life, or the health, of the population of any given region, or country.

Such conditions were created by 1999, when Russia was in great need of food aid, as a result of one of the lowest harvests in recent times, (in 1998, the harvest was 45% less than the figure for the previous year) and there was nothing left in the reserves. The Iraqi crisis put in doubt the promised food aid by the Americans, as a consequence of Russia speaking out against the Anglo-US attack, without the sanction of the UN. This confirmed that any state wishing to pursue an independent foreign and domestic policy must, above everything else, be concerned about its food independence. A more recent confirmation of this is the EU embargo against Yugoslavia.”³

Thus, clearly in the minds of these two authors, there is no argument that food security is the same as food independence, i.e. the ability, if not even necessity, to produce and meet the demand for food, internally, further ensuring both the country’s independence and sovereignty and reducing the influence of other states, or blocs of states, on the country’s ability to pursue its own foreign and domestic policy agenda.

But, given the current nature of the world’s economic environment – and despite the near collapse of the Anglo-US model of capitalist development last year⁴ – is it realistic for any country – never mind potentially one of the world’s great grain producers – to even attempt to become completely self-sufficient in food, (which is what both Burdukov and Saetgaliyev are advocating) with the resultant negative impact that could have on the world balance of trade? Thankfully, not everyone in Russia thinks as these two: emphasising the fact that approximately 40% of Russia’s GDP is made up of the sale of its natural resources, one specialist has warned that it would be tantamount to “suicide” for Russia to “isolate itself from the world economy.”⁵

British experts, in examining the whole issue of food self-sufficiency, firmly argue that such a step, for any country, would have very negative consequences for one and all, calling it both “misplaced and unbalanced”, at the national level but that worse than that, on a global scale, it would “foster reciprocal protection, isolation and nationalism.”⁶ Whilst readily admitting the

³ Burdukov, *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴ M Zuckerman, “The free market is not up to the job of creating work”, *The Financial Times*, 19/10/2009.

⁵ L Goricheva, “Estestvenno-prirodnye usloviya razvitiya natsional'nykh khoziastv Rossii i zapadnoi Evropy”, *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*, no.3, 2004, 27-36; 34.

⁶ *Food security...*, *ibid.*, v;

that food self-sufficiency is “psychologically reassuring”, the British report also stated that such a policy “ignores the realities of an interdependent world and a sophisticated market – not Government – driven food chain in the UK and Europe, whether domestic or overseas production is sourced.”⁷ In short, such a policy would run the risk of reducing competition, increase the price of food to the consumers, in the medium-to long-term, reduce choice and, potentially at least, also affect the quality of food available, with the resultant impact on the health of the consumer. So, such a policy, if pursued, could actually be worse for the consumer, in the long term, rather than better.

Even those Russian analysts who have adopted a more Western-style definition of food security still leave themselves with the opportunity of a quiet jibe at the West for the current state of Russia’s reliance on food imports:

“ food security...is the stable availability of food products for the overwhelming majority of the country’s population to maintain a normal life style.”⁸

Nothing wrong here, all perfectly reasonable but, of course, there is the sting in the tail:

“the growth in imports leads to dependence on importers who, in accordance with the old Soviet fear stereotype, can ‘turn off the tap’ at any moment. In other words, import dependence is a threat to the country’s future food security.”⁹

Thankfully, as Russia is a signatory to the UN’s FAO, the Rome definition has been translated into Russian and, therefore, is known to Russian analysts/policy makers. One senior Russian Academician, S Mikhnevich, writing in one of the country’s most respected journals, not only quotes the Russian translation of the FAO’s definition, but also outlined what, in his opinion, constituted the “fundamental” conditions for food security:

“1) to ensure the food security of any country, there have to be guaranteed stable and adequate levels of food production, meeting *completely* [emphasis – SJM] the demands of the country;

2) food security can only be achieved when the physical and geographical conditions of access to food can be guaranteed;

3) food security is achieved [at a global level] when agricultural produce is sent to the world market in significant quantity and in a stable manner;

⁷ Food Security...*ibid.*, 47.

⁸ E Serova, “K voprosu o prodovol’stvennoi bezopasnosti Rossii”, (13/9/2001), 1-9; 1. (http://old-opec.hse.ru/article.asp?tmpl=artclke_doc_print&d_no=15869).

⁹ *ibid.*

4) no less important...is ensuring that the population is supplied with high quality, safe food.”¹⁰

Thus, whilst there still seems to be a tendency here to equate food security with food independence, despite the impracticalities of pursuing such a risky policy, nevertheless, it is an improvement in understanding the general nature of food security on a global scale and does pay more than a passing acknowledgement to the FAO's 1996 definition of food security. There is still too much of an emphasis on a nationally-inspired food security agenda, though, ignoring both the requirements of the global economic market in trade, as well as the economic benefits of comparative advantage, (trading what you can and do produce for those goods and services that you do not) and, as outlined earlier, such a nationalist-motivated attempt at food autarky carries the real political risk of other states attempting to pursue their own nationalist-inspired economic agenda with potentially disastrous global economic and political consequences. Russia, like every other country in the world, will not be able to satisfy the food demands of its population for every food product which the people want – coffee, oranges, bananas, etc – therefore, it has to strive to achieve the necessary levels of production of wheat, meat, milk products, etc. to meet the normal level of demand of the population, allowing the latter to lead full and healthy lives.

Mikhnevich then concludes his article by outlining what he considers to be the three main factors governing Russia's food security;

“maintaining and increasing domestic food production; maintaining a steady level of [food] imports; creating the proper reserves of food.”¹¹

It is to each of these factors that we now turn.

Food production

In terms of increasing domestic food production, Russian agriculture is still recovering from the hammering it took following the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the subsequent withdrawal, to all intents and purposes, of the state from supporting the agricultural sector of the economy, leaving agriculture to cope, as best it could, with the new market conditions.

As one Russian commentator wrote:

¹⁰ S Mikhnevich, “*Ekonomika, ekonomicheskaja teoriya. Liberalizatsiya mirovoi sel'skokhozproduksii i problema 'prodovol'stvennoi bezopasnosti'*”, *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*, no.1, 2003, 59-63;60.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

“the introduction of free trade once again demonstrated the unprofitability of the country’s agriculture, created a problem for the country’s food security, placed its sovereignty under threat because of the nation’s colossal dependency on food imports.”¹²

One Western specialist – S K Wegren – in a recent analysis of Russian agriculture in the 1990s/first decade of this century – has detailed some quite alarming statistics, concerning the parlous state of Russian agriculture since the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and during the period of “adaptation”. For instance, by 2005, the production of grain combine harvesters was only 11% of the 1990 figure; the corresponding figure for the production of tractors was even worse – only 2.6% of the 1990 figure!¹³ Replacement rates for old and outmoded agricultural machinery have also significantly fallen, leading Wegren to conclude that:

“these shortcomings contribute to the fact that mechanised production in Russia is two to four times less than in developed countries, and as a consequence, yield and production costs are higher than in most EU member[states], making it difficult for Russian products to be price competitive.”¹⁴

Thus, over-reliance on old machinery increases the cost not only of tilling the land, but also gathering in the harvest, (for instance, older tractors and combine harvesters are less fuel efficient and, since the price of diesel also has to be factored into the cost of every sack of grain, this increases the price of wheat in the sack still further, thereby making it harder to sell, either in Russia or anywhere else, for that matter).

But the problem behind increasing domestic agricultural production is not just mechanical, it is also concerned with increasing the amount of arable land under the plough and, no less important than that, retaining, if not increasing, the number of people to stay and work the land, in various capacities. Again, according to Wegren:

“in 2005...seventy-two regions in Russia were experiencing rural depopulation, and 13,000 villages had no permanent residents, (three-quarters of them are located in the central and north western economic regions). Moreover, the cohort that would otherwise constitute the next generation of agricultural workers and leaders are not choosing agricultural professions.

¹² Yu Oleynikov, “Prirodnye factory khoziastvenno-ekonomicheskoi deyatel’nosti”, *Svobodnaya Mysl’*, no.11, 2002, 37-52; 46. And the subsequent economic crisis of the 1990s also further underlined one of the age-old problems of Russian economic development: the resources are in the East whereas the bulk of the population is in the West, (Goricheva, *ibid.*, 33).

¹³ Stephen K Wegren, “ Russian agriculture and the WTO”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol.54, no.4, July/August 2007, 46-59; 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Only a small percentage of the students who attend agricultural institutes or academies ultimately accept employment in the agricultural sector.”¹⁵

He quotes further official statistics, underlining the poor state of food production in Russia: the amount of arable land being used for agricultural production throughout the 1990s/first decade of the 21st century had significantly decreased – from 210m ha in 1992 to 194.6 m ha by 2004. There has also been a corresponding decrease in the number of people directly employed working in agriculture: from 10.1 m in 1992 to 6.8 m by 2004.¹⁶

At a “round table” discussion held in 2008 in the Russian *duma*, devoted to analysing the whole complex of issues surrounding the nation’s food security, much evidence was produced outlining the precarious nature of Russia’s agricultural system and the plight of the men and women left to work it, as well as the consequences of the inactivity of past Russian governments in tackling the crisis. Sponsored by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CP of RF), it was nonetheless attended by over 300 Russian parliamentary deputies and helped generate both heat and light on the problems facing the country’s food security.

Leading the debate was Academician V Kashin, one of the country’s top agricultural experts, (as well as being deputy chairman of the CP of the RF). He lost little time in painting a grim picture of the contemporary state of Russia’s food security:

“at the present moment in time...only 50-52% of food products supplied to the population is produced domestically. The large administrative-industrial centres rely on 70-80% of their food being supplied externally. The Government of the Russian Federation wastes about \$22-26 billion annually on imported food...Prices of ecologically pure [green, organic] food remain inaccessible to the vast majority of the population. Thus, for example, over the past 2-3 years, the rise in wages and pensions has been in the order of 15-20%, whereas the price of basic foodstuffs has increased x1 ½ - 2 times. Particularly severe is the situation in the villages. Here pay is only about 40% of the national average. About half the villagers do not even get the poverty line [minimum]”.¹⁷ According to Kashin, the level of rural poverty varies from region to region, from 30-70%.¹⁸

Kashin then examined the current state of agriculture’s technology park and, once again, the figures made for grim reading: annual production of tractors was down to less than

¹⁵ Wegren, “Russian agriculture...”, *ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 58.

¹⁷ V Vishniakov, E Krasnolutskaia, “‘Pravda’: Prodovol'stvennaia bezopasnost' – glavnaia zabota kommunistov”, *Pravda*, 6/6/2008.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

10,000,(1/22 what it had been back in the days of the USSR); similarly, for ploughs – less than 1,000; combine harvesters, only 1/66 of what it had been back in 1990!¹⁹ Thus, the agricultural technology park is not being renewed quickly enough and, as detailed earlier, this means that Russian agriculture is still having to use old and outmoded machinery, leading to inefficient production and increasing costs. Despite it being illegal, with the “connivance” of the local authorities, agricultural land has been taken out of agricultural production: 41m ha has been taken out of the agricultural pool for other “development” purposes, including the building of cottages.²⁰

The land that is left is also not free from the process of degradation, be it natural or man-made, due to increased flooding, soil erosion, increased acidification of the soil. For instance, according to the latest country profile of Russia, produced by the Economist Intelligence Unit, due to the “tendency to drought on a three-year cycle”, Russia’s arable land only occupies 32% of the total land area of the country.²¹ As the climate and seasons change, so does the quality of the soil. According to Burdukov and Saetgaliyev, by 2050, the erosion process will affect 30% of Russia’s soil resource.²² The importance of a nation’s soil resource has also been remarked on recently by the British Secretary of State for the Environment, Hilary Benn: “good-quality soils are essential for a thriving farming industry, a sustainable food supply and a healthy environment.”²³ To add further to Russia’s current erosion misery, Kashin has quoted a figure of 40% of arable land being prone to wind and water erosion; 85% of the land also being prone to weed infestation.²⁴

There has also been the demographic problem to contend with, long now a feature of the post-Soviet landscape of Russian society. Like many authors before and after him Kashin bemoaned the demographic changes which have taken place in Russian society since 1991: “15,000 Russian villages have disappeared and a further 9,000 are inhabited by only 20-30 people.”²⁵

A “round-table” discussion, held in July 2003, involving various representatives of the Agrarian Party, painted a very grim picture of contemporary rural life in Russia: of an estimated 40 m people living on the breadline, 25m live in the countryside. 30,000 village schools have closed down since 1991. With little holding them in the villages, as soon as they can, the rural youth are leaving the countryside in droves, thereby exacerbating the

¹⁹ V Vishniakov, *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *EIU on Russia-Country Profile, 2008*, (London, 2009), p.39.

²² Burdukov and Saetgaliyev, *ibid.*, 8.

²³ Fiona Harvey, “Benn cultivates plans to guard the nation’s soil”, *The Financial Times*, 25/9/2009.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

demographic crisis in the Russian countryside still further.²⁶ This defection from the villages to the towns will have serious consequences for the further economic and social development of Russia, not least in areas of strategic significance to the future well-being of the country. In his presentation to the discussion, the contemporary governor-general of the Russian Far East, E I Nazdratenko, recalled an event when Yeltsin was still president of Russia back in the early 1990s:

“And who says when food security ends and the security of the state begins? I remember a meeting in Khabarovsk chaired by Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin...and they reported to him that more than 800,000 people had quit the [Russian] Far East. The thing was...that this was the most work-capable section of the population! Who’s left? Pensioners, mothers who don’t know how to feed their children. And here this entire problem flows into yet another problem – demographic security.”²⁷

Less people on the land, still too much reliance on using old and outmoded equipment, more land being taken out of agricultural production, all these factors have meant an increase in production costs and, if that was not enough to contend with, farmers have also had to contend with increasing fuel prices. There has been a huge increase in the price of fuel for agriculture. The price of oil throughout the 1990s/first decade of the 21st century had increased considerably more than the price of grain. To buy a tonne of diesel fuel, Kashin has calculated that the farmer now has to pay x10-12 more than he did back in 1990.²⁸ And how else can the farmer offset his fuel costs? There is the one usual and trusted method: he simply passes the increase in costs onto the buyer, whoever it may be, thereby increasing further domestic food inflation, already recorded as one of the highest in Europe.²⁹

Lack of investment in agriculture has also been one of the key reasons behind Russia’s weak food security: the country’s oligarchs have been significantly less interested in investing in Russian agriculture, than in Russia’s oil and gas industry, (as has the state). The state has, until comparatively recently, pulled out of any meaningful national levels of investment in agriculture ever since the collapse of the USSR, a point equally made by both Western and Russian experts:

²⁶ “Prodoval’stvennaya nedostatochnost’”, “round table” discussion involving representatives of the Agrarian Party, 9-15/7/2003, (<http://www.lgz.ru/archives/html-arch/lgz282003/Polosy/art3-l.htm>)

²⁷ “Prodoval’stvennaya nedostatochnost’...”, *ibid.*

²⁸ Vishniakov, *ibid.*

²⁹ “U nas produkty dorozhaiut v 9 raz bystree, chem v Evrope”, *Izvestiya*, 28/4/2009.

“from 1965 to 1985, Russian agriculture was receiving 28% of the total investment in the Russian economy. In contrast, in 2001, agriculture got just 2.7% of the vastly diminished total investment [figure].”³⁰

A point reinforced by Kashin. In the newspaper report of the “round-table” discussion, (tellingly subtitled, “the state washes its hands”), he stated that:

“and there is one more reason [for the crisis state of Russian agriculture] – the reduction of state support for agriculture, which has fallen from 12-25% of the huge state budget of the USSR to 1.2% of the Russian budget for 2008...In Western Europe, on average, the state supports its agricultural system to the tune of \$300 per ha, in Japan, [the equivalent figure] - \$473, in USA - \$324, in Canada - \$188. In Russia, state support for the village amounts only to \$13 per ha.”³¹

In other words, not only has Russian agriculture suffered, especially in comparison with its Soviet counter-part, with less state investment, but an order of magnitude less than in the past. The figures virtually speak for themselves: how can Russia’s agricultural system ever hope to recover from the damage of the 1990s, unless the state intervenes on a massive scale and attempts to redress the situation and timeously, if previous levels of food production are to be restored and the country’s food security significantly enhanced? As outlined here, there are a number of steps which the central government has to adopt, if the crisis is not going to deepen and/or become irrecoverable, with Russia, for instance, having to import a significant proportion of its food from abroad. For instance, there has to be greater investment in new technology, replacing the economically and ecologically inefficient tractors and combine harvesters of the past, with more fuel efficient machines, not only better for the environment, but also able to reduce the cost of producing the grain. Due to climate change, whilst some regions may actually prosper as a result of the earth getting warmer, climate change will also have a very negative impact on Russia, therefore the government has to adopt steps to ensure that the land suffers less from increasing soil and water erosion. In terms of the “human” side of the equation, the government also has to re-create the rural socio-economic-cultural fabric, thereby making the countryside a more enticing place to work. In short, there is no end of steps the government could adopt if it wants to dent Russia’s food import bill and increase the nation’s overall food security.

The collapse in Russia’s agricultural system has been reflected in falling harvest figures throughout the 1990s and throughout part of the first decade of the 21st century although,

³⁰ G Ioffe, “The downsizing of Russian agriculture”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 57, no.2, March 2005, 179-208; 180.

³¹ Vishniakov, *ibid.*

thankfully, there has been some improvement on the dismal figure of 2000. In 1990, the last recorded harvest of the USSR, the harvest stood at 116.7 m tonnes; by 2000, this figure had fallen to 65 m tonnes.³² However, thanks to good weather, Russia's harvest has shown signs of improvement: in 2002, it stood at 86.6 m tonnes; by 2004, this had fallen back, again, to 78.1 m tonnes.³³ An excellent harvest in 2008 – 108 m tonnes – allowed Russia to export 22 m tonnes of grain abroad.³⁴ However, according to latest official figures, this year's (2009) harvest looks like it will only manage to reach 85 m tonnes. According to the recently promoted Agricultural Minister, Elena Skrynnik, the shortfall in this year's harvest is due to a severe drought affecting 15 of Russia's 89 regions and covering some 4.5 m ha of Russian land.³⁵ Despite the significant drop in this year's harvest, Russia is still confident that it will be able to export 15-19 m tonnes of grain.³⁶ Again, this only goes to prove what has long been a truism in Russian agriculture: there is much that the state can control – prices, investment, wages, infrastructure – but, to date, it cannot control the weather, therefore as long as Russia is as it is, it will always be subject to the vagaries of climate and weather. Russia can easily experience a good harvest one year, even a record one and, a year later, can find itself reaping a harvest some 20 m tonnes short of the previous year's total.

There are those in Russia who even argue that global warming would, in general terms, be of benefit to Russia, by allowing some currently unproductive regions being more amenable to future agricultural production and reducing Russia's dependence on Western food imports:

“an increase in temperature of 1-2 degrees centigrade, combined with an increase in greenhouse gases, will increase the productivity of Russian agriculture x1.5-x2 in the next 12 years (!) Global warming will be the equivalent of shifting Russia's border to the south, away from the cold, northern zone. In the meantime, it will have the opposite effect on US agriculture, reducing its productivity by -1.5-2... Thus, in about 20 years' time, Russia could become the largest food exporter [in the world]. They understand this well in the West and that is why there has been such a pronounced interest in buying up good agricultural land and growing pressure on Russia!”³⁷

³² E Kovalov, “Agro-promyshlenniy sektor Rossii”, *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*, no.4, April 2007, 82-91; 84.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ “Grain exports sent to shrink”, *Russia Today*, 27/8/2009, p.2.

³⁵ “Russian farmers gather over 72 m tonnes of grain – Agriculture Ministry, 16/9/2009, ITAR-TASS, (http://www.itar-tass.com/eng/level2.html?News_ID=14338526&PageNum=0)

³⁶ “Grain exports...”, *ibid.*

³⁷ P Burdukov, “Prodovol'stvennaia bezopasnost' – nasushchnaya problema Rossii”, (5/4/2009), <http://www.nacbez.ru/ecology/article.php?id=158>.

Less hysterical, but still repeating the same general thought, is the following statement published in one of Russia's most respected journals:

“global warming...could soften the natural conditions of our country, thereby leading to a significant increase in the amount of agriculturally productive land.”³⁸

Climate change may make some regions more conducive to increasing food production, but it will also make other regions less productive and, as long as Russia remains the size and composition that it is, there is no escaping the fact that as some regions become easier for agriculture, other regions become more difficult. Therefore, what Russia may gain in one hand, it may lose in another.

Food imports

In order to make up for the shortfall in agricultural production and to meet the demand of its people for food, Russia has had to import more and more of its food from abroad, increasing the alarm of some that over-reliance on food imports could, as previously outlined, impact on Russia's domestic and foreign policy options.³⁹ This point was made by no less a political figure than the current Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev when, on a pre-presidential election tour of Russia in 2008, he remarked that Russia relied on food imports “too much” and that the country still “had not learnt how to produce the sufficient quantities of food required.”⁴⁰ A brief look at the most recent statistics reveals how Russian domestic food production has been particularly badly affected by the collapse of the old Soviet agricultural model and the uncontrolled introduction of the free market: between 1992-2007 (estimate), the overall number of head of cattle dropped from 52.2 million head to 21.5 million head; similarly, the drop in the pig population was just as severe: from 31.5 million (1992) to 16.1 million, (2007, est.) and, finally, the country's sheep and goat population declined from 51.4 million, (1992), to 21 m, (2007, est.).⁴¹ The amount of milk and eggs produced has also fallen sharply over the corresponding period: milk production fell from 47.2 million tonnes in 1992 to 32.2 million tonnes by 2007, (est.); egg production fell from 42.9 m eggs in 1992 to 32.2 million by 2007, (est.).⁴² Medvedev has been particularly struck – and concerned – by

³⁸ Kovalev, *ibid.*, 91.

³⁹ E Kovalev, “Agroproduktivnost' i sverkhproduktivnost' Rossii: novye vozmozhnosti i starye problemy”, *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*, no.3, 2008, 40-47; 44.

⁴⁰ E Shishkunova, “Perviy vitse-premier...”, *Izvestiya*, 11/1/2008.

⁴¹ Itogi Vserossiyskoi sel'skokhoziastvennoi perepisi 2006 goda (v 9 tomakh). Tom 3. Zemel'nye resursy i ikh ispol'zovaniye (M. 2008), table 15.20, (http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b08_11/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d02/15-20.htm).

⁴² *ibid.*, table 15.22, (http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b08_11/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d02/15-22.htm).

the fall in Russia's livestock production, stating that Russia now only met 60% of its current demand, the rest of the demand being met by meat imports, "with all its attendant risks."⁴³

In a further analysis of the level of food imports and consumer demand, the Vice-President of the Russian Academy of Agricultural Sciences, I Ushachev, not only warned that, on average, the Russian consumer was only receiving 70% of the scientifically agreed minimum daily meat requirements – and only 60% of the scientifically agreed minimum daily milk requirements – but that Russia should establish national "threshold" limits in terms of its own domestic production for such commodities as sugar (80%), meat and meat products (90%), fish and fish products (80%), etc.⁴⁴ Whilst it may be deemed admirable, if somewhat debateable, that any country should strive for such domestic production in today's global market – for reasons of comparison, for instance, Britain is "only" 61-63% food self-sufficient, according to the latest available data⁴⁵ - with Russia continuing to spend some \$22-\$25 billion annually on food imports, such percentage figures do not look like they will be achieved soon. Indeed, according to one scientific study, it could be simply an uphill struggle for Russia to achieve anything like these threshold figures. In 2005, foreign food imports rose by 25-28%; whereas domestic food production only rose by a meagre 1.6%. A year later, food imports made up 33% of entire Russian food market.⁴⁶ By 2008, the level of food imports to Russia was x3.5 times more than it had been in 2000⁴⁷

According to one study, examining the level of food imports and its impact on food security:

"the dependence of Russia on foreign food imports far exceeds 17-20% which the majority of developed countries consider the baseline for food security."⁴⁸

Thus, in terms of meeting this part of the equation of food security, level of food imports, Russia seems to be failing: the level of food imports is not stable and is set to remain high for quite some time to come.

⁴³ Shishkunova, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ I Dashkovskiy, "Kommentariy. Prodovol'stvennaya bezopasnost' vo vremena krizisa...", (5/11/2008) – <http://golden-horde.com.ua/kommentarij-prodovolstvennaya-bezopasnost-vo-vremya...>

⁴⁵ "Feast and Famine", *The Financial Times*, 11/8/2009.

⁴⁶ I Korolov, V Zhukovskaia, "Import i prodovol'stvennaia bezopasnost' Rossii", *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*, no.11, November 2007, 13-20; 13.

⁴⁷ Vishniakov, *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Korolov, *ibid.*, 14.

Food reserves

The third and final part of the food security equation – food reserves – is arguably the hardest one to detail, given the general level of secrecy surrounding both the figures and the state reserve system. It is said that only 3 people in Russia know the full extent of the country's reserves – the President, the Prime Minister and the head of the agency running the reserve complex.⁴⁹ This is further underlined by the fact that, unlike most other government agencies and ministries, the Federal State Reserve Agency, (to give the reserve its full title, although it is usually more commonly referred to simply as *Rosrezerv*), it does not even have its own official press service although, in recent years, it has developed a reasonably interesting website. In short, information on or about *Rosrezerv* is hard to come by.

Thankfully, though, its last but one head, A Grigor'ev, gave a number of interviews when he was in post – right up to his untimely death at the end of 2008 – which did throw some light, both on the nature of the reserves, as well as their overall purpose. Given the nature of conflict over the centuries, how much a state has in reserve for the proverbial “black day” has always been one of the closest cards played to the chest by any country and, needless to say, Russia is no exception and, indeed, is a country long steeped in the attitude and culture of being a closed, secret society. Generally, estimating what a country will need in order to survive a national emergency – of whatever description – is a complex and critical matter: if policy makers get it wrong, the ruling regime may appear weak or, worse, not able to cope with the unfolding emergency. In relation to an autocratic state, that can spell nothing short of disaster: depending on the nature of the emergency, not only could the ruling regime be placed under threat, but even the very country itself. On a contemporary level, *Rosrezerv* plays a quiet, but vital, role in insuring the state against the proverbial “black day” and, so, in terms of the country's present and future susceptibility to food blackmail, it is a vital element in Russia's food security triumvirate.

Put into a historical context, one writer, in evaluating the importance of the state reserves, noted:

“on the eve of the 1917 February Revolution, the state had no food reserves at its disposal. For the USSR, isolated internationally, it was vitally important that it had enormous reserves *for the black day* [emphasis-SJM]...Nowadays, more than half of the budget of *Rosrezerv* is spent on food products – in the main, wheat, milk products, vegetable oil, tinned food.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ V Novikov, “Gosrezerv”, *Sankt-peterburgskiy novosti*, 18/6/2003, no.112, 5.

⁵⁰ Svetlana Samodeleva, “Zapasi i sokhrani”, *Moskovskiy komsomolets*, 25/10/2004.

Despite the overall importance of the state reserve, following the collapse of the USSR, the situation looked very grim. In an early interview, as head of *Rosrezerv*, Grigor'ev gave an outline of how bad the situation was in the early 1990s:

"I remember how, at the beginning of the 1990s, tinned food was issued from the reserves only on the production of tokens...But the tragedy was [also] in another way – at that time, renewal of the reserve effectively stopped. The unified state reserve system collapsed, both on the scale of the USSR, as well as internally within Russia. Everything which the new states had stayed with them."⁵¹

This ties in partly with a telling comment made in Burdukov/Saetgaliyev's work, published towards the end of the 1990s:

"the untouchable reserve, which had been created by the USSR, was [already] consumed in 1992, by 1999, judging by a number of statements emanating from the government, Russia had, at its disposal, food reserves for 2-3 weeks for one third of the population."⁵²

Further confirmation of the parlous nature of the state reserve at this time came in the preamble to a piece published on Grigor'ev, not long after the latter's death:

"by the time Aleksandr Andreyevich was appointed, the Russian state reserve system was in a very severe position. The financing of the state reserve from the state budget had not been carried out since 1992. A multi-billion non-return of goods from the state reserve, (with the sanction of the federal government), by the republics, krajs, oblasts and various other organisations had taken place."⁵³

And, as if that was not bad enough, prior to Grigor'ev appointment in 2001, there had been a steady degradation of both the technical and human resource element of *Rosrezerv*:

"without repair and modernisation, degradation of buildings, warehouses, engineering systems and equipment had accelerated. The scale and extent of thieving...of goods and materials from the state and mobilisation reserves to alien organisations had grown...The decline in discipline had continued, as had the departure of qualified cadres."⁵⁴

⁵¹ Novikov, *ibid.*

⁵² Burdukov and Saetgaliyev, *ibid.*, 4.

⁵³ V Gasumyanov, "Chelovek iz osobogo rezerva", *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 19/1/2009.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

Whilst it is not pertinent here to examine the steps taken by Grigor'ev to rectify the situation – most of which, probably, will be clouded in official secrecy for years to come, anyway – suffice it to say that, in possibly his last ever interview, Grigor'ev was able to assert that:

“concerning *Rosrezerv*, we want the people to know that Russia's state reserve system, in its composition and the reserves, is ready and, what is more important, able to carry out its preordained work.”⁵⁵

Quite simply, the state reserves ensured both the economic well-being of the state in times of crisis but, more importantly, the actual functioning of the state, both in war and in peace time:

“the reserves of the state reserve are not only an important element in maintaining the national security system, but also a stabilising factor in developing the economy. Neglect towards the state reserves has had severe consequences. In 1917 one of the reasons behind the collapse of the Russian Empire was the exhaustion of the state's reserves. On the other hand, created just before the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War, the all-state material reserves allowed us to withstand [the German onslaught], win and then resurrect the national economy [after the war].”⁵⁶

In other words, the state's reserves are its final insurance policy, its last means of protection against the proverbial “black day”. Given the history of the 20th century, Russia knows all too well the cost of unpreparedness in the event of the “black day.” Whether, or not, everything is as rosy as implied by Grigor'ev is impossible to say, given the secrecy surrounding the actual physical holdings of the state reserve, but the work carried out for this particular paper would seem to indicate a degree of doubt concerning Russia's food preparedness. In the round table discussion carried out last year, Kashin had the following to say, specifically as regards the country's grain reserve:

“the strategic grain reserves, created under the Soviet system, are gone and, given the current state of the economy, have practically no chance of being re-created. Today, for example, in the state intervention fund, there is only 400,000 tonnes of grain – the majority of it being wheat to make bread. The amount in reserve is less than the amount required for a month's production of Russian bakers.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ A Rebrov, “Chto nuzhno strane na ‘cherniy den’”, *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 22/7/2008.

⁵⁶ E Berlin, “Aleksandr Grigor'ev: ‘Polnykh analogov sistemy Rosrezerva v mire ne sushchestvuet’”, *Profil*, no.27, 17/7/2006. There was a hint, in March of this year (2009), that the grain reserve may have been used in order to steady the price of wheat in Russia, so that farmers would know in advance what to expect at the end of the current wheat growing season, (“13 marta sostoyalsya perviy press-brifing ministra sel'skogo khoziastva RF Eleny Skrynnik”, <http://www.mcx.ru/news/news/show-print/3273.178.htm>)

⁵⁷ Vishniakov, *ibid.*

Whether the state does have enough in reserve, only an extreme emergency would be able to say with certainty. But if the state is to have enough in reserve for the next “black day”, it must increase domestic production and physically be able to have enough grain, meat, eggs, etc., to warehouse. As has already been shown, though, this is simply not happening, at least not currently. There can also be little doubt that, to put it mildly, Russian agriculture has taken a real hammering since the collapse of the USSR and the state has virtually left the old agricultural model to fend for itself, with minimum investment in the technology park, rural infrastructure, fuel subsidies, etc. However, recently, the state has shown a more interventionist approach to agriculture and has begun to partly redress a number of the problems brought about due to the rash introduction of the free market system, by making agriculture one of the state’s much lauded National Projects, approved back in December 2006. It has attempted to help partly restore domestic agricultural production, as well as attempt to lay the bedrock for future prosperity in the rural sector of the economy.

National Project (2006-2008)

Part of the government’s response to the deteriorating domestic agricultural situation, as well as the high level of food imports, was the announcement, in December 2006, of a new short-term plan, entitled, “the development of the agro-industrial complex”. Scheduled to run for just two years, it was designed to tackle the short falls in production of both livestock and specialists for the agricultural sector, as well as help stimulate further small farm production, by making available subsidised credit.⁵⁸ According to one analyst, the National Project did not represent a “qualitative” change in the attitude of the government towards the agrarian sector, it was not a panacea designed to cure all the ills of the domestic agricultural sector. Thus, the Project did not mean substantial direct state investment in helping to further develop agriculture, but instead helped promote the creation of a state-private capital partnership, by making available subsidised credit, thereby allowing the smaller private landowner to develop his land better, as he saw fit.⁵⁹ For all the measures outlined in the National Project, the state allocated 34 billion roubles from the national budget, spread over the two-year period.⁶⁰ So far, the results of the Project would appear to be mixed, good in some areas, weaker in others. By September 2009, according to the official figures, there has been an increase in the production, for instance, of meat and chickens: the combined figures stood at 9.3 m tonnes, an increase of 380,000 tonnes on the corresponding figure for

⁵⁸ Kovalev, *ibid.*, 86.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*. Also Stephen K Wegren, “Russian Agriculture and WTO”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol54, no.4, July-August 2007, 46-59; 56.

⁶⁰ Kovalev, *ibid.*, 86.

2008. The housing programme for attracting the future generation of agricultural specialists to come and stay in the countryside has also shown an increase in the amount of housing created: the 2009 figure showing an increase of 32% on the 2008 figure, (there were also 7% and 10% increases, respectively, on the number of new homes with running water and gas central heating).⁶¹

However, despite an increase in meat production, Russia still looks set to import 25% of its annual meat consumption figure; there was a slight decrease in milk production, (down 0.5% in 2009 compared to the corresponding figure for 2008) and, despite the gloss of the official commentary – “in the current year, the harvest is expected to reach 85 m tonnes, higher than *the average for the past ten years and sufficient to meet the domestic demand and maintain export potential*” [emphasis as in original text] – as already noted, this figure is still way below last year’s figure by over 20 m tonnes. In short, Russia still has some way to go before meeting one of the unwritten requirements of its food security: producing a consistent and stable harvest, year in, year out.⁶² Thus, in overall terms, the National Project would appear to have enjoyed only partial success: small private farms have reduced part of the nation’s dependence on food imports, but with a smaller grain harvest and the need for the country to import a significant quantity of its meat, unless the state continues to support domestic agricultural production through subsidised credit and other measures, (helping to maintain and improve animal husbandry, assisting local producers to improve their acquisition of new technology, assistance in the form of some sort of fuel subsidy), then the success of what has been achieved so far may prove to be short lived and the nation’s food security only partially enhanced. After all, can a two-year partial assistance programme make amends for so much neglect spread over almost a twenty-year period?

Is food the new oil?

“Food riots destabilised countries around the world last year – more than the financial crisis – and may well return. If food was ever a soft policy issue before, it now rivals oil as a basis of power and economic security...Geopolitically, food is the new oil.”⁶³

Russia’s historical relationship with the very food it grows and consumes is a deep and complex one – where else but in Russia can one find a whole museum devoted entirely to

⁶¹ “O khode realizatsii Gosudarstvennoi programmy razvitiya sel’skogo khoziastva i regulirovaniya rynkov sel’skokhoziastvennoi produktsii, syr’ya i prodovol’stviya na 2008-2012 gody i osushchestvleniye antikrizisnykh mer v agropromyshlennom komplekse”, (<http://www.mcx.ru/news/show/3583.htm>)

⁶² *Ibid.*; “O tekushchem polozenii v agro-promyshlennom komplekse. 2009”, (<http://www.mcx.ru/documents/document/show/11292.htm>)

⁶³ “Fix the land deals”, *The Financial Times*, 27/5/2009.

analysing the country's relationship with bread?!⁶⁴ The lack of bread has been one of the main factors in bringing about regime change in Russia in the last century and the collectivisation of agriculture in the 1920s-1930s being used to engineer and force through social change, resulting in the deaths of millions and the enforced imprisonment of countless more. In short, Russia has an involved relationship with, literally, its daily bread. Thus, anything, absolutely anything, which looks set to threaten this most basic of commodities sounds off alarm bells from one end of the country to the other, not least in the Kremlin. Hence Russia's growing dependency on foreign food imports, particularly since the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and the subsequent virtual disintegration of the state reserve system, has been viewed by many specialists and policy makers as a virtual attack on Russia's national sovereignty and independence and has encouraged a few amongst them to dig out their Cold War dictionaries and warn the nation of dastardly Western plots, designed to undermine the very genetic make-up of the Russian population itself, through GM food, for example. As a former deputy chairman of the *duma's* security committee, Burdukov, wrote a few years back:

“the tendency in the growth of food imports from those countries which are members of the North Atlantic bloc remains [high]. Unfortunately, this deep penetration leaves one in little doubt that the food dependence of other countries has, for the USA and NATO, not only a political but, above all, a political-strategic significance and can be seen as a food weapon. On top of this, direct military aggression is only an element of a much larger operation, carried out during the course of the global information-economic war [carried out] against sovereign states, the aim of which is the complete seizure of their internal market, including food [market]. The expansion of dumping by the agricultural producers of W Europe and the USA in the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, particularly in Russia, has already been met with [some] success. Its result – the subversion of agricultural production...the conquest of the [domestic] agricultural market by foreign producers...the successfully conducted plan in the growth of the dependence of Russia on food imports...is a threat to our sovereignty.”⁶⁵

Of course, for the extreme Right in Russia, the country's dependence on food imports has opened up a different line of attack, helping them in their attempts to convince their fellow Russians that the West is using food as a weapon to further interfere in Russia's internal affairs, as well as influence the future development of the Russian race itself. In an address

⁶⁴ St Petersburg Museum of Bread – heartily recommended! Absolutely fascinating museum! Has its own website, although, unfortunately, not too much by way of publications. Website address is <http://www.museum.ru/M165>.

⁶⁵ P Burdukov, “Rossiya utratila prodovol'stvenniu nezavisimost'”, *Tikhookeanskiy vestnik*, nos.21-22, 27/11/2003.

made to the *duma* in June 2008, the deputy chairman of the *duma*'s security committee, S Abel'tsev, stated that:

"Russia could become the largest food producer [in the world] and will then be able to dictate its own conditions. They understand this very well in the West, which compels them...to take measures to undermine our food security. I would also suggest that certain forces in the West are hatching up ideas about undermining the genetic make up of our population with a view to [further] depopulating Russia...I am convinced, and I'm not alone in this, that everything which is currently taking place in Russia is [part of] a chain of a carefully planned and brilliantly executed process, whose main purpose is the destruction of our agro-industrial complex and all [related] areas, concerned with supplying our people with food...It is a fact that the cockroaches have already begun to quit Russia's cities. Because of genetically-modified food products, the cockroaches, who breed with astonishing rapidity, have passed on unnatural genetic compounds to their offspring, which have accumulated in their bodies and passed on [to their offspring in turn]...And what if this reaches a human being? Alien molecules inevitably lead to genetic and cancerous diseases, change the DNA of a human being and, as a result, lead to multiple mutations and the appearance of 'X-Men'".⁶⁶

Abel'tsev then concluded his address by quoting two old Russian proverbs, which linked his thinking on the food security issue with that of any old bigot brought up deep in the heart of the Russian countryside: "what's good for a Russian is death for a German" and "do not even take a pie from the hand of the enemy."⁶⁷

Despite the Russian economy having enjoyed a steady period of growth over the past decade, the level of food dependency on imports was still viewed as a threat to Russia's national sovereignty by no less a figure than one of Russia's top agrarian specialists, Academician V V Miloserdov:

"increasing dependency on imports creates an undoubted threat to national security. Foreign firms have conquered the domestic market. In huge quantities, they [the West] export to us poor quality and genetically-modified produce...the sharp decline in the nutrition of a significant proportion of our population has serious consequences both for the health and life expectancy of Russians."⁶⁸

And in another article which appeared in one of Russia's main daily newspapers, analysing Russia's inability to feed itself, the piece was peppered with words and phrases like,

⁶⁶ S Abel'tsev, "Prodovol'stvennaya bezopasnost' pod ugrozoi", 3/6/2008, (<http://www.ostrogozhsk.ru/news/index.php?id=243>)

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ V V Miloserdov, "Prodovol'stvennaia bezopasnost'". In the same article, Miloserdov also reassured his readers that he didn't think that "CIS countries would specially poison Russians with poor quality or genetically-modified food"!(<http://vladimir.miloserdov.name/articles/page-51.html>).

“security”, “threat”, “destruction”, “war”, “real enemies”, “eternal battle”, and the classic, “and if there is war [tomorrow]?”⁶⁹

Thus, for many specialists and non-specialists alike, food security is most definitely viewed in a wider, global context, with many seeing Russia’s food insecurity as being akin to an undeclared attack on Russia’s ability to conduct its own affairs in the way it deems best in its national interest. They view the level of food imports as another attempt by the West to undermine not only their own domestic agricultural market – thereby increasing Russian dependence still further on food imports – but also as a way to try and influence Russia’s ability to act on the world stage as an independent political, military and economic power. They view food as a new weapon in the struggle for influence, as regards the future direction of the world:

“the influence of outside factors in maintaining Russia’s food security is growing: the real growth in the spending [and earning] power of the developing countries, intensive development of bio fuels in the developed countries, the fall in the world reserves of food, the unfolding of the world financial and market crisis. Food is becoming ever more one of the levers of political and economic pressure in international relations.”⁷⁰

A number of Western commentators have also partially bought into this Russian perception of the future significance and power of food supplies:

“Russia plans to form a state grain trading company to control up to half of the country’s cereal exports, intensifying fears that Moscow wants to use food exports as a diplomatic weapon in the same way as *Gazprom* has manipulated gas sales.”⁷¹

In similar vein:

“Russia’s bumper wheat harvest has allowed it to open a new front in the re-emerging Cold War, as it uses food to expand its influence in the Middle East and Africa... Thanks to rising world food prices and a new law allowing foreigners to own land, Russia is once again exporting. With the proximity of Black Sea ports to wheat deficient Africa, Asia and the Middle East, Russian wheat has a competitive edge.”⁷²

⁶⁹ A Aronov, “Esh’-potey, rabotay-merzni!”, *Izvestiya*, 19/2/2008.

⁷⁰ Doktrina proizvodol’svennoi bezopasnosti Rossiyskoi Federatsii, Proekt (2007), (prepared by the Russian Agrarian Movement, <http://rad.su/documents/doktrina/>)

⁷¹ J Blas, “Moscow to seize grain export controls”, *The Financial Times*, 1/8/2008.

⁷² H Miles, “Russia uses big wheat yield as a foreign policy tool”, *The Scotsman*, 27/9/2008.

Conclusion

Thus, if food is set to become the new “oil” of the 21st century, either as a producer or as a supplier, Russia could easily extend its influence all over the world. Judging from what has been described above, there is little doubt that Russian policy makers do see food as a future agent of influence for advancing Russian interests. But, as also shown here, the knife cuts two ways: if Russia sows more land – in 2004, Russia sowed less land than it did back in 1913!⁷³ - if Russia harvests a bigger crop and on a more regular basis, if Russia continues to take a serious, more long-term view concerning the development of the agrarian sector of its national economy, THEN it could enjoy a competitive edge over its nearest grain rivals and it could seek to extend its influence, in a similar way as it has done in exploiting, for political and economic ends, its massive reserves of oil and gas. But these are all big “ifs”. Conversely, if Russia fails to achieve any, or all, of these self-imposed demands, then its food security could easily be thrown in sharp doubt and the consequences of that, both for the individual and society, could be severe.

The vast majority of nations are not self-sufficient in terms of food and will be increasingly more sensitive to the demands of the population for cheap, accessible and nutritious food, as the latter become harder to obtain at the right price. Thus, if Russia succeeds in harvesting a regular, big, harvest, it could be an important player on the world food stage BUT, as shown above, it has a number of significant factors to take into account if this objective – and the desire to be self-sufficient and, therefore, food secure – is to be attained. Despite a fall in this year's harvest, it still intends to export grain: Russia still plays politics with the harvest.

Russia's relationship with the food it produces has been crucial in terms of internal change. Food was a key weapon in the sustained Bolshevik attack on the autocracy throughout 1914-1917, culminating in the victory of the Bolsheviks in October 1917: would the Army have mutinied, if it had been properly fed? Would the workers and peasants had been as susceptible to Bolshevik propaganda if their bellies had been full? All social classes in 1917 had major problems with the governing regime, but the lack of food helped to bring things into sharper focus and compelled many to see the regime as it was – ineffective, corrupt and weak. Empty stomachs politicises people more quickly, regardless of social class. A truism not lost on those in power today.

Hence, contemporary Russia's strong identification with food and national security. Their own history has taught them that “the less of bread, the more of politics.” However, we should not think that this is something peculiar to the Russian psyche: in an account of

⁷³ *Prodovol'stvennaya bezopasnost'*, 24/10/2005, (http://student.km.ru/ref_show_frame.asp?id=872AB7C323DA460CBA6BDA7AE37...)

recent remarks made by the US Secretary of State for Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, it was reported that:

“the US Agriculture Secretary has warned that unless countries take immediate steps to sharply boost agricultural productivity and food output and reduce hunger, the world risks fresh instability...Tom Vilsack indicated that food security and global stability were tied in a sign that Washington’s worries about the global food crisis go well beyond its humanitarian implications. ‘This is not just about food security, this is about national security, it is about environmental security...I can figure out there are only three things that could happen if people do not have food: people could riot, that they have done; people migrate to place where there is food, which creates additional challenges; or people die.’”⁷⁴

In its drive to achieve food security, Russia clearly sees the link between food and national security and the experience of its own past testifies that it also knows the cost, better than most, of all the options outlined by Vilsack. One of the main questions it faces in the 21st century is which of the above three options, if any, becomes a dominant factor in its 21st century?

⁷⁴ “An issue to digest”, *The Herald*, 11/8/2009.

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