

Revolutions are Born in Breadlines

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Maria Fedorova, assistant professor in the Department of Russian Studies at Macalester College in Minnesota, is the author of a new book called *Seeds of Exchange: Soviets, Americans, and Cooperation in Agriculture, 1921–1935*. It covers some of the consequences of the famine in the Volga region of Russia. Although there were clear signs of the impending famine by 1919, the book takes 1921 as its starting point. Why?

Maria Fedorova: The Bolshevik government only acknowledged it in 1921, when Maxim Gorky appealed to the international community, calling on people to help Soviet Russia.

Jeremy: So Lenin and Maxim Gorky appealed to the international community for help. And one of the first responses came from the US, the Agricultural Relief Administration. What was that?

Maria: Yeah. So, the American Relief Administration was sort of a successor of the US Food Administration, a wartime agency that was established by the American government. It was an organisation that encouraged American citizens to adhere to food conservation, to preserve these key products, like wheat and sugar, to conserve them in order to send them to the allies. So that was during the war time. But after the war was over, the Food Administration ceased its existence. But a new agency emerged because the United States wanted to continue its policy of feeding the allies. Even after the war, it was important for several economic as well as ideological reasons. As for economic reasons, the European market presented a very lucrative opportunity for the United States to export its agricultural products. And in terms of ideology, what we see in Europe after the war is the rise of leftist movements like communist organisations and communist parties, socialists in Germany, like in Central Europe and Eastern Europe. And Americans see this and think, well, we need to send them food because, revolutions are born in breadlines. So in order to prevent these revolutions, we need to send food aid. And

that is what the American Relief Administration does. And of course, there is a humanitarian aspect to this as well.

Jeremy: Yeah, but sending food to prevent a country becoming communist is one thing, but sending food to the mothership of communism is something else again.

Maria: Yeah.

Jeremy: So how did that play out with the American public and the government?

Maria: Yes, that's a great question. When I was looking through the documents, the ... Herbert Hoover, never ... Hoover again, he was unofficially presiding over this administration, never said that the food was sent to Soviet Russia or Bolshevik Russia. It was sent to the Russian people. And that emphasis was very important for the United States. So the kind of humanitarian mission showing that the capitalist regime is probably much better than the communist one. It's this kind of ideological aspect of this. And another ...

Jeremy: Because capitalism had food to spare.

Maria: Yes. Yes, absolutely. And another reason was an economic reason because during the First World War, as the United States Department of Agriculture and the US Food Administration encouraged farmers to produce more, giving out credits to buy technology to expand the acreage, farmers did indeed produce more. And after the war was over, there was a crisis of overproduction. And the farm lobby really pushed the government to send this relief either to Europe or now to Soviet Russia because of the famine conditions, in order to help the American farmer.

Jeremy: So sending food and medicine was kind of the official approach. But there was another strand which you describe as the radical strand, and that's the Friends of Soviet Russia, and their approach was completely different. So tell me about that.

Maria: Yeah. The Friends of Soviet Russia is an interesting organisation, and it's not the only organisation that advocated the idea that what the Soviets need is not only food, but technology and expertise. Because the goal is not a short term, uh, eradication of hunger, but a long term investment into the agricultural

reconstruction of these areas that were hit by the famine. So these organisations — friends of Soviet Russia, it's an umbrella organisation — and different pro-communist, smaller groups, send usually money to this organisation and this ... And then the Friends of Soviet Russia would organise these groups or communes of American based experts, farmers who would go to Soviet Russia and establish communes there and try to help peasants and teach them how to use new technology like tractors or other agricultural implements that the Americans were making.

Jeremy: And how did that go? Were the Americans accepted?

Maria: Well, Herbert Hoover and the American Relief Administration really did not like this move on them because they tried to control this humanitarian relief entirely. And they thought that the work of the Friends of Soviet Russia undermined the organised relief to the Soviets. So there is, in the archive, when I worked in the archives, there's a whole ... there are a bunch of boxes on FBI documents following these friends of Soviet Russia organisations and trying to come ... Put together cases against them to prevent the spread of Communist propaganda. Also, because these communist, these organisations definitely, you know, were leftists, they argued for not for purely humanitarian relief. But that was a larger aid to the Soviets as a government.

Jeremy: Tell me about these communes that were established in Soviet Russia. Were they successful?

Maria: Not all of them were successful. So we started seeing these communes going beginning in 1919, 1920. But the one that I focus on, it is the American Tractor Unit, which was a little bit different from an American commune that came to Soviet Russia in that it was a kind of short term help. So this tractor unit was comprised of a dozen of American experts who raised a lot of money, impressive amount of money, to go to Soviet Russia to teach peasants how to cultivate land with tractors, and they ... And at the head of this organisation was Harold Ware, who I think that literature does not give him a lot of credit. But he's a fascinating figure.

Harold Ware organises this tractor unit and hopes to go to Ukraine because this is the prominent agricultural land. This is where his help was needed. But the Soviets, once he arrives in Moscow, the Soviets decide to send him to Perm, which is in southern Urals. And

absolutely, the technology that he was bringing was not meant for those lands. But he could not argue with the government. So his unit traveled to Perm and worked there for several years. And I can say that in a way it was a successful venture in that, yes, he brought tractors. Yes, lots of ... And caused lots of excitement about this new technology. On the other hand, what I saw in the documents was, the resistance that especially local agricultural experts, local Russian agricultural experts, had towards him and towards his unit. So they resisted him, saying that Americans did not really understand Russia and Russian conditions and how to cultivate land, and that the management techniques that they were bringing were not appropriate for that land. So in the end, Ware left that region, but only to come back to the United States, travel there, and then he would return back again in 1925.

Jeremy: And what was Ware's motivation? Was it only to improve agriculture or was he politically motivated?

Maria: Yes, he was. He believed that this experience would help him and the people who was he bringing with him from the United States to learn from the Soviets and then to bring this knowledge back to the United States. Because he was fascinated with the idea of turning a peasant into a farmer worker. So, a new kind of man. And he felt that by learning from the Soviet experience, he would be able to persuade American farmers and American farm organisations to follow this example or to at least introduce this idea, because he saw that division, collision between the city and the farm in the United States, and he felt that it was similar to what he saw in the Soviet Union. And perhaps the Soviets knew how to kind of merge that *schmutzka* — *schmutzka* in Russian is to put together, the farmer and the peasants and the worker together.

Jeremy: Okay. That's the first part of Americans in Russia. But let's talk a little bit about Russians in America, because that's the counterpart to this. Some Russians decided that they wanted American know how and technology and primarily what they wanted was seeds. And my hero, Nikolai Vavilov, set up the Russian Agricultural Bureau in New York to get seeds.

Maria: Yeah, that is a fascinating story. So in 1921, Nikolai Vavilov traveled to the United States. He also went to some European countries as well, and there in the United States he met Dmitri

Borodin, and together they decide to organise the Russian Agricultural Bureau in New York City.

Jeremy: And Borodin. Who is he?

Maria: So Borodin was an entomologist. He fled Russia. I'm going to make a mistake right now, but I feel like it was in 1919, 1920. And Borodin had already established some contacts with the US Department of Agriculture, with agricultural colleges and agricultural experts by the time Vavilov comes. So they come up with this idea to organise the agency, kind of representative agency, in the United States. And the Russian Agricultural Bureau would ship seeds and also help Soviets who would come to the United States to organise their visit in the United States. It will also help send literature from different parts of the world, not necessarily from the United States, back to then Petrograd, Saint Petersburg. And it was about seeds, but not only. And it also promised that it would send seeds back from Soviet Russia if they were requested by American experts. And that was the case.

Jeremy: So American experts asked for seeds from Soviet Russia. What were they particularly interested in?

Maria: I think that you know, at this time, everybody is fascinated with wheat and corn, with sorghum and these sort of ... And there were other varieties, of course, but these are kind of the main ones that you see in the documents, different varieties of wheat, particularly drought resistant varieties. Because of the famine conditions in Soviet Russia, the government, the Soviet government and plant breeders themselves, they understand the importance of developing new varieties that could withstand those droughts that hit Russia, and also that that happened in the United States as well.

Jeremy: Well, that's the other thing. I mean, in the in the Great Plains, you've got the drought, which puts an end to the productivity gains in places like Montana. Were they looking for expertise from the drier areas of Russia?

Maria: Yeah. The story there is interesting. I think that ... I did not see Montana experts being interested in seeds in particular, but they were interested in farm management. What we see in Montana is ... The agricultural crisis in 1921 and on, because of a series of drought years that were happening in 1918 1919, because so many people, so many

Americans, were encouraged to migrate to eastern and central parts of Montana, those agricultural regions, because of high prices on wheat, the large acreage that they could get there, and suddenly these environmental conditions hit these farmers. And within several years, lots of American farms in Montana went bankrupt. So what American experts then understand that, yes, seeds is one problem. But another problem is that cultivation technique, like dry farming, and how are we going to teach these farmers to use dry farming? But the third larger problem is farm management. How do you organise farm labour? How do you organise the ... How do you manage the farm in a more effective way? So, and this is what American experts want to see how the Soviets do it. That is how M.L. Wilson, a prominent agricultural economist, he would be later the undersecretary of agriculture during Roosevelt's administration. So he was invited to go to Soviet Russia in 1929 exactly for this purpose, to manage a large farm. And for him, this is an incredible opportunity because he ... Like, in the United States, he could not experiment with 100,000 acre farm, but in Soviet, in Soviet Russia, he could.

Jeremy: M.L. Wilson. I'm intrigued that in 1929, Soviet agriculture was sufficiently advanced for him to be able to learn about agriculture there. How did that change? I mean, this is before the first five year plan?

Maria: This five year plan starts in 1928, so 29 is just the that first. It just starts. Right. And I think that the farm that he works at in 1929 is just, it's also in its beginnings. So his goal as an expert was to come and write a plan for it on how to build such a large scale farm. So that is what he's learning. He's learning how to create this almost, it's a grain city. So it's not only a farm, it's also a school and an urban area where people would live. It is a complex, so, like an industrial complex, but we ... But this is a farm complex where people live, work, study, et cetera. There is also a so-called educational farm that was attached to it. The ??? complex. So it is, yeah, it is something that I feel like he could he was not able to see in the United States on such a large scale. And for him, this is a fascinating experiment.

Jeremy: And then back in New York, what happened to the Russian Agricultural Bureau?

Maria: Yeah, that is a sad story, because the Bureau functioned pretty well between 1921 and 25. But then the Soviets recognised the

importance of this sort of independent organisation that was sending seeds and literature to Soviet scientists and just exchanging this information. So the American Trading Organisation, a trade organisation that represented Soviet interests in the United States, takes over. If you know, I won't tell this story short, but it the ... Borodin and Vavilov, Vavilov is very ... He did not ... Of course, he did not appreciate that move because he thought that the goal of that small scale exchange was sort of broken. And but Borodin actually encouraged this this merge with the American ... with Amtorg, American Trading Organisation, because he thought that Amtorg will allow the Russian Agricultural Bureau to send seeds on a large scale. Well, that that did not happen. In the end it's just the Russian Agricultural Bureau would only organise trips of Soviet travellers to the United States and send literature.

Jeremy: So Borodin was envisaging the export of seeds from America as a commodity, while Vavilov really wanted them, small quantities for scientific research. And this exchange of farmers, agriculturalists going from America to the Soviet Union and farmers and agriculturalists from the Soviet Union coming to America, does the exchange continue at the same pace in the early 1930s?

Maria: Unfortunately, no. We see a decline in the visits of Soviet experts. That's what I traced a little bit more, and the Bureau of Plant Industry has a very interesting collection of letters that were sent by Soviet experts asking to give them permission to travel across the United States. And I feel like there was much more activity by the Soviets during the 1920s, but because of the changing political climate and ideological climate we see this decline in the visits. I cannot say that, say, the Great Depression and the Red Scare and the Five Year Plan and Stalin's repression on the Soviet side completely ended the exchange. There were still people who went back and forth, but it was not as prominent. And in the United States, what I saw was the rise of anti-communism and the reluctance of working and cooperating with Soviet experts or having ... Maybe having unofficial connections were okay, but working together on some official projects that was not seen in a positive way. And on the Soviet side, we still see that the Soviets closely follow up the news about American agriculture. There were reports about that. But the general idea is that the Great Depression showed that American agriculture and its development was in decline. That was kind of the Great Depression. And what was happening in the United States was a great example of this and that

the Soviet model was better and would lead the way in terms of agricultural modernisation.

Jeremy: Your book ends before the rise of Trofim Lysenko and the death of Vavilov. But I wonder if you think that illuminates anything about changes in Soviet agriculture, that in some respects didn't really adopt the American way of plant breeding, et cetera, et cetera, that somehow the lessons that might have been learned were forgotten.

Maria: Yeah. I think that this story definitely illuminates the idea of possibilities and the connections that could have been established and that were affected by politics and ideology and by the economic crisis. I think that the work that was being done through these international exchanges could have continued could have been more profitable for both sides, if not for the rivalry, economic rivalry, of course, and for these ideological battles between ... Between the Soviet Union and the United States. But on the other hand, what I wanted to show is that even during those times when there were no diplomatic connections, when it seemingly these two countries did not talk to each other, we can see that on the middle level, on the level of the experts, they try to connect with each other, and they try to talk and discuss the problems because they see the farm problem and agricultural modernisation is a problem for the entire world. And the question of feeding the world is important for them in terms of ...

Yes, Lysenko did not get into my book, but I think that Vavilov's story and the stories of other experts whom I highlight in the book is a tragic story about the effect that their foreign connections had on their work and their lives. Because when I started writing the book, I did not know that all the people whom I'm going to write about are going to perish somewhere or another. I mean, on the Soviet side. It was devastating to see how much they worked towards the improvements of agriculture and improvement of society and its life, and how the change in regime and perspective affected their lives.

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