Chapter 4

The Hungry Steppe – The Plans

The Bolshevik Revolution took place under the umbrella of a Communist doctrine that sought to redefine economic relationship within civil society and replace traditional sources of authority once in the hands of capitalists, the religious establishment, and royal dynasties. The Revolution aspired to create a ‘new Soviet man,’ who would be liberated from the socioeconomic chains of tradition, culture, religion, ethnic affiliation, and nationality. In place of these, it offered an alternative in the form of a new equalitarian civic society that sanctified progress, education, mechanization of production, and sought to ignore past traditions which it viewed as belonging to an era of darkness and ignorance. Implementation of Marxist-Leninist ideology encountered many difficulties in its application, although its supreme objectives remained in place. Party activists were forced to tailor implementation on the ground to prevailing conditions and capabilities (all the more so since the activists themselves were not always convinced of the correctness of this path).

After nationalization of land and its redistribution immediately after the October 1917 Revolution, the rural sector went over from production with the goal of marketing produce, to production for private consumption since it was no longer economically worthwhile to market one’s crops due to the prohibition of independent marketing, and the price gap that developed between city and farm (up until adoption of the New Economic Policy). As a result, severe shortages appeared in the cities, and famine even broke out. As a result of the Bolshevik regime confiscation campaign, farmers fled to the city, but not before they destroyed their crops before they could be seized, creating even more severe shortages. Concurrently, in the early 1920s a wide-scale campaign was carried out against the traditional Russian agrarian elite – collapsing the rural sector and spreading chaos that led to years of famine and desolation.

The Communist Revolution had more of an impact on the rural sector than on the urban sector of society. There are those who hold that the real civil war in Russia was not between “Red” and “White,” rather it was between the city and the countryside. This war was directed towards rural society’s backwardness, targeting not only antiquated production methods, but also rural ways of life, beliefs and traditions. In the course of this struggle, the state imposed most of the tax burden on the villages in order to develop the city and industry. This struggle was accompanied by nationalization of land, seizure of property and imposition of heavy taxes which, it was charged, were even higher than
those imposed during the Tsar’s reign. The intense opposition of the rural sector sparked the organization of peasants that often took the form of an armed struggle against the regime. Since the rural population was the overwhelming majority of the population, farmers demanded representation and participation in the government; the proletarian regime adamantly opposed any form of or local rural organization or signs of autonomous self-organization of any kind, which were viewed as a potential threat to their own hegemony, fearing they could become an alternative political movement to the Communist party.¹

Unlike this policy which was implemented in all the key parts of the Soviet Union, authorities in Central Asia, who were aware of the “cultural backwardness” of the rural population, not only didn’t oppose organization of the rural populations outside party frameworks, they even initiated such an organization. Already in the beginning of the 1920s, the authorities founded the Koshchi (plowman) Union, designed to organize village poor – engage in ideological indoctrination among them and attract them to join the ranks of Communist authorities. In essence, the organization became the spokesman or ‘voice’ for the rural sector in dealings with the authorities, and more than engaging in indoctrination of “the village poor,” the Koshchi became a tool for rural elites to deal with the new regime. In Central Asia as well, as in Russia itself, agrarian elites were more educate and more politically engaged than the poor farmers and former serfs, and therefore they were savvy and quick enough to mobilize the organization to serve their own vested interests. ²

The tension in relations between the ‘village’ and the ‘city’ in the Soviet Union was created not only due to demographic forces, it was also the product of the economic dependence of the city on the rural hinterland which was the main supplier of food and other essential needs of the city. While most of the population of the state was rural, the Revolution had been carried out in the name of the urban proletariat, which was not eager to make the village a partner; rather it sough to bend the rural sector to accommodate the needs of the proletarian revolution.³ After initial attempts to bend rural society to serve the needs of the city failed, leading to an economic disaster of existential

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² S. Kolk, ‘Soiuz Koshchi ego rol’ i zadachi’, PV, 247 (1-11-1925) (The Koshchi Union its aim and targets); A. Bogdanov, ‘Soiuz Koshchi v Kazakhstane’, Sovetskoe Stroitel’stvo, 4 (1929), pp. 91-92 (Koshchi union in Kazakhstan).