CHAPTER 4

Emergency Measures Taken During the Three-Year Period of Economic Difficulty

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Abstract

During the three-years of difficulty from 1959 to 1961, the Party and the State earnestly summarized experience, paid attention to correcting errors, and went all out to lead the people to struggle to remedy the disaster. They took a series of measures which downsized the urban population, reduced the scale of grain requisitioning, urgently allocated and imported grains, economized on clothing and food and implemented the "gourds, vegetables, and substitutes" policy for grains, as well as increasing grain purchase prices, making a hard push in agriculture, etc. This gradually turned the situation around and ended up preserving social order and relative stability.

Keywords

Three year period of difficulty – emergency disaster relief – grain – population – "gourds, vegetables, and substitutes"

Following the failure of the “Great Leap Forward” movement, China’s national economy encountered severe difficulties between the years 1959 to 1961. Nationwide agricultural and industrial output values fell dramatically. The nation’s total grain output fell from 400 billion jin in 1958 to 340 billion in 1959, then to 287 billion in 1960, even lower than 1951’s figure.1 Grain output rebounded slightly to 295 billion jin in 1961. Supply of grains, edible oils,

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meat, eggs, etc., grew extremely tight, and there was a nationwide famine. The severe situation was a lesson to the whole party. In November 1960, the Central Committee issued the “Emergency Instructions Regarding the Present Policy Issues of Rural People's Collectives,” which demanded that the entire Party do its utmost to resolve all manner of “leftist” deviations; to arrange for all levels of leadership and the entire body of cadres to make deep forays into rural villages; to read and explain policies to grassroots cadres and peasants; and to correct errors, implement policies, and struggle to reverse the difficulties together with them. At the same time, the Party and the State adopted a series of emergency relief measures.

1 Emergency Reallocations and Imports of Grain to Respond to the Grain Crisis

The first half of 1960 was the worst part of the famine. Statistics indicate that the grain inventories of all 82 large and mid-sized cities in the nation were less than one third of normal. At this time in the cities of Nanchang, Jingdezhen, Ganzhou, and Jiujiang in the province of Jiangxi, a major diverter of rice to elsewhere in the nation, rice was sold immediately upon being diverted. In the face of a nationwide famine, the Party issued a series of orders in 1960, calling for the emergency reallocation of grains. To respond to the emergency, the Party called for seasonal adjustments of “using early to save late” and “using late to save early,” i.e. first sending the year’s earliest wheat and rice from the South to the North to assist supply shortages prior to the autumn grain harvest of the Northeast; then, in winter and spring, sending northeastern grains to southern regions in need during spring famines. To assuage some concerns in the areas shipping grains away, the Center expressed that, “the Center is deeply concerned about the areas diverting away grains; we will send assistance to those regions facing cyclical difficulties in July, August, and September by all conceivable means. Right now it is important that these regions absolutely first

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3 Yang Shaoqiao 杨少桥, “Wei min shi jiejin xinli” 《为民食竭尽心力》 [Going all out to feed the people] and “Huainian Li Xiannian tongzhi” 《怀念李先念同志》 [Remembering Comrade Li Xiannian] in *Weida de renmin gongpu—huainian Li Xiannian tongzhi* 《伟大的人民公仆 怀念李先念同志》 [Great Servant of the People, Remembering Comrade Li Xiannian], (Beijing: Central Documentary Press, 1993), 250.