Industrialized nations often look back upon their former agrarian pasts with fondness and eminence as it is seen as a prominent step towards the path to modernization. The situation is no different in Russia—there is much romance and idealism with the past; images of great harvests, hardworking, cheerful peasants on farms, and young, strong Soviet children holding bundles of wheat are a few tropes which may come to mind. However idyllic the images of the past may be, the current agricultural system is much different. The food production system in the Russian Federation is a relatively unchanged system from the one found in the former Soviet Union; it is mismanaged, underproductive, but despite this has the possibility for much more. Structurally, the system is surviving on the skeleton of the former Soviet system—it has seen low amounts of research and development (R&D), low levels of inputs such as the use of fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides, and despite holding the greatest amount and a portion of the most fertile soil of any country in the world it continues to be well below expected production levels. In lieu of the setbacks due to the history of the Soviet Union and their effects on the current system, the Russian Federation has the potential to be a global powerhouse in agricultural production.

**Brief History of Russian Agriculture**

Through the years, agriculture has been productive in the area which now comprises of the Russian Federation. The region has had a prolific history of regime changes—all of which have had their impacts on the production of food within the country. The first period which is worth noting is the time which is known as Imperial Russia from 1721 until 1917. During this period, the country saw periods of great land expansion beginning in the fertile lands of the west (which is now Ukraine) and stretching far into the east into the lands of Siberia. With the acquisition of more land came more agricultural opportunities for the budding global power. Imperial Russia was a country of landed estates; it was a predominately rural nation where the aristocracy and the gentry class owned large estates. Serfs provided the bulk of the rural workforce. Many estates were run on a quitrent system, where serfs managed leased land but were expected to pay a quitrent or land tax—quitrents were both in the form of money and in agricultural goods.1

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Following a brief interlude for the Russian Civil War (1917-1922), the next major period which produced many lasting impacts on Russian agriculture was the Soviet Union (1922-1991). A major theme which prevailed during this time was the continuation of industrialization, with some attempts to redefine the structure of food production. The first major reform regarding agriculture in the Soviet Union was Vladimir Lenin’s New Economic Policy (NEP); NEP was an attempt to retain capital within the Soviet Union—it allowed peasants to freely trade agricultural products and from the profits the government collected a tax.ii 

The NEP encouraged the emergence of a new wealthy peasant class, known as kulaks.

Collectivization of agriculture occurred under the years of Josef Stalin, who saw the wealthy kulaks as a threat to the ideals of communism. He forcibly collectivized this class of farmers, usually around the formation of a village. The collectivization of kulak farms, as well as the creation of large, state-owned farms were a part of the first of many of Stalin’s Five Year Plans.iii Industrialization and agriculture worked together in harmony initially—production went up, and there was increased use of machinery: the most notable use of machinery in this period was tractor use. Following Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev continued many of the agricultural policies set forth in the Stalin years but with an eye on reform. His most ambitious plan was the Virgin Lands Project, which aimed to utilize land in the area of Kazakhstan in Central Asia but was regarded as a failure.iv From that point onward, conservative policies lasted until Mikhail Gorbachev, but by this point it was too late for agricultural reforms to take place, as the country was transitioning into a new period of yet another regime change.v

Characteristics of the Contemporary System

The contemporary structure of agriculture in Russia is surviving on the structure set in place during the Soviet Union. In the opening years of the Russian Federation, there were many complications surrounding the transition from state-owned property and enterprise into the private sphere. Transitioning private land to citizens for agricultural use was of particular difficulty as many years of legislation continually left a convoluted and trying situation for people to

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v Ibid.
acquire land. The structural system which landed in place in the post-Soviet world was one which prevailed the former configuration; large-scale state-owned farms have been rematerialized as large corporate farms. The inherited size and scale of the agricultural system set in place does not encourage the large stakeholders to be particularly innovative as they own such large shares and can afford to incur setbacks and losses without much detriment.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations provides the most concise and straightforward summary of the best indicators of agricultural production. Economic development in Russia has continued to grow since the mid-nineties; since 1995, the average gross national income per capita has raised $8,000.00 USD.

In terms of inputs, the Russian Federation, and in comparison to other countries which are at the same stage of development, Russia has relatively low use of inputs. Fertilizer consumption on arable land and land under permanent crops has plateaued since 2009 at 15 kilogram nutrients per hectare. Pesticides are seemingly the most used input in Russia—in 2012, Russia imported approximately $500 million USD worth of pesticides. The largest food imports to the Russian Federation are meat, dairy products and eggs, which comprise 20 percent of total food imports to the country. Nearly half of the agricultural exports of the Russian Federation are

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vii Helena Bollesen (Danish agricultural specialist) in discussion with the author, July 2014.


Many of the declining attributes of the system can be attributed to the declining rural population of Russia, as more people during and since the fall of the Soviet Union have been moving to urban areas. The distribution of urban and rural populations are heavily weighted towards the urban areas: about 75 percent of the population lives in urban areas and the rest (25 percent) are found in rural areas.\textsuperscript{xv} Agricultural research and development is not as sought after as it was during the Soviet Union, and since there have been no sweeping land or agricultural reforms since the nineties,\textsuperscript{xvi} the current structure is likely to prevail for some time.

Before and after the fall of the Soviet Union, multinational agribusinesses have had a foothold on the agricultural system. The most well-known farm corporation which has a long history with the area is Cargill. It began its history with the country in 1963 with grain exports; today it employs more than 3,000 people in Russia and is one of the largest foreign investors in the agro-processing segment—currently contributing $1.1 billion USD to this portion of the Russian economy.\textsuperscript{xvii} In terms of its span of agricultural products in the country, Cargill is far reaching: grain and oilseed trading, crushing, refining, and bottling, meat and poultry animal feed formulation, production and distribution of syrup, starches and starch derivatives and more, are some of the products and services it provides.\textsuperscript{xviii}

Another large agribusiness, Monsanto, also has offices in Russia, but in more recent years the government has shown aversion towards biotechnology—especially genetically modified organisms (GMOs). In May 2014, legislation was moving to “equate GMO-related activities that may harm human health or even cause death, to terrorist acts and impose criminal liability on producers, sellers and transporters of genetically modified organisms.”\textsuperscript{xix} Such harsh legislation implies that the Russian government will not be supporting agricultural R&D which is backed by the American standard of supporting biotechnology. It is obvious that the government wishes to steer clear of the path which the American government has arguably been a trailblazer—genetically modified organisms are not wanted, and in addition the country does not currently show signs of any promising developments in other forms of agricultural research and development.

\textsuperscript{xiv} Ibid.
Impact of Western Sanctions on Agriculture

The tension over biotechnology is not the only cause of anxiety for the Russian Federation and the United States in terms of agricultural collaboration and cooperation. The crisis in Ukraine, which is viewed differently by Western and Russian counterparts, has provoked authorities such as the European Union, the United States and Canada to issue sanctions. The sanctions made by these powers predominately targeted Russian banks, the wealthiest businessmen, state oil firms, and in addition, banned exports of services and technology to state oil firms engaged in Arctic and deep-water exploration. What implications does this create for Russian agriculture? In response to the sanctions, the government has retaliated by banning imports of meat, fish, fruit, vegetables and milk products from the United States, the 28-nation European Union, Norway, Canada and Australia for a year. Five of the top ten countries Russia receive most of its imports from are Western nations targeted in the ban. Currently, we are facing one of the most interesting turning points for agriculture in Russia since collectivization—only time will show how the sanctions/bans improve or further hamper the food production system.

The current times present a unique occasion in the history of Russian agriculture; until recently there has not been the impetus to enact change within the system—the recent Western sanctions and the food ban which resulted from them have provoked a time for a change of the system. Russian politicians have declared this period as a “golden opportunity for Russian agriculture,” but with how far behind the current system is, it is estimated that it will take years to revitalize rather than the short twelve months of the current food ban. Unlike the United States and the European Union, Russia does not have an active nor comprehensive subsidy system in place for farmers. However, in August of this year, Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev called for a development plan towards the self-sufficiency of Russian agriculture; the plan sets aside approximately $42 billion USD to be used for supporting farmers until 2020, but in Russia lending rates tend to be much higher to farmers—8-10 percent being the average rate.

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xxiv Ibid.
Implications for the Future

Self-sufficiency and food independence is of vital importance to the Russian government following the ban of Western food. It is eerily similar to the opening years of the Cold War when the Soviet Union was forced to become self-reliant, as the relations between it and the West continued to become increasingly strained. Until recently, there was no political motivation for the government to set its sights on improving the agricultural system—agrarian reform efforts had been regulated to the tropes of the past where Russians remembered fondly the great wheat harvests and what can be considered an exaggerated “time of prosperity” during the Soviet Union. The food production system in Russia has not seen an update in innovation since the days of communism; the system set in place nearly 60 years ago was ground-breaking for the time it was created for, but in the current day it does not provide the essential building blocks for a successful and productive agricultural system.

Geographically Russia is the largest country in the world; the total area is 1637.69 million hectares. xxv Of that total land, 119.75 million hectares is arable land, and 1.60 million hectares is used for permanent crops—the majority of Russian land comprises forest land. xxvi There is potential for agriculture in the total area of land alone—although exhausting all its arable land is not the best option, but unlike many other countries, Russia can afford land extensification. Not only does the country have the most unused agricultural land in the world, it is also home to some of the best land for cultivation as well. The Black Earth Region or, as the soil is known in Russian, Chernozem, is found in four regions; the “black earth” soil is known for the following qualities: black color, high percentage of humus as well as high natural percentages of nutrients such as phosphorus and ammonia, great depth—generally over one meter, and a clay-like structure which is favorable for retaining water. xxvii The climate of the Black Earth Region is comparable to that of the Midwestern United States and allows for one annual harvest from July to October. xxviii Effectively, Russia has all of the elements which are necessary to be a leader in agriculture, but does not utilize all of them.

Concluding Remarks

Russia has such a rich history with agriculture so that the current situation with the system seems out of place—instead of continuing down a supposed path, the country has begun to fall short of expectations. Through the 1990s and onward, the Russian Federation has declined or plateaued in several


xxvi Ibid.


xxviii Ibid.
quantifiable agricultural development indicators such as fertilizer use and labor force involved in agriculture. In recent years Russia has not seen the rise of much R&D in this sector, and biotechnology does not seem to be in the sights for the farming future. Currently, the political situation creates new and unique opportunities for Russian agriculture which were not present since the time of the collectivization. Western sanctions imposed due to the crisis in Ukraine provoked a food ban of EU and US originating food—such a ban is seen as a potential for national agriculture to once again flourish. Despite the relative setbacks the food production system faces, there is potential for continuing agricultural development, as Russia is a large area with significant arable land available, and holds some of the best soil on Earth. Only time will tell if the agricultural system is to improve, or if it will continue to support itself on the crumbling infrastructure of its Soviet past.
References


Bollesen, Helena. (Danish agricultural specialist) in discussion with the author, July 2014.


