The Siberian Initiative

For several months the Siberian party had been struggling in the grain collections under an official slogan of 'social pressure' which had not been elaborated in much detail and had not produced the massive procurement level needed to complete the plan. Two months had passed without a breakthrough. The party leadership was haunted by the prospect of a repeat of the events of the previous year when the import of 200,000 tons of grain during the spring and summer in a manoeuvre to alleviate shortages had stunned the Stalinist wing of the party by depleting hard currency reserves intended to finance industrialization. This year capital construction plans were even more ambitious and the party leadership was determined that they should not be obstructed. By early March 1929, the inevitable advance of time, the looming danger of failure to achieve the remainder of the grain plan and the real possibility of removal from their posts served to concentrate the minds of central and Siberian party leaders on the problem of how to secure a breakthrough in the crisis. It was not a Stalinist blueprint that determined the march of events in this crisis; rather the contingency in Siberia, and in the country, at this crucial juncture generated a peculiar dynamic in policy-making. Time was a critical factor, as the pressure intensified to find a solution to the grain shortage before the spring thaw turned hard sleigh roads into impassable mud that would bring transport to a standstill in the countryside for several weeks. By the middle of March, the bad roads season had already gripped the grain areas of the south of the country (in the Ukraine and Kuban steppe), focusing attention on Siberia and the Eastern grain producing areas, where the spring thaw would not arrive until April.

There had been a massive surge in grain procurement in Siberia over the 1927/8 level and by the beginning of March about 1.4 million tons had been collected without serious effort representing an increase of about 40 per cent on the same period of 1927/8 (when Article 107 had been enforced). This tremendous achievement did not, however, satisfy the voracious appetite of the centre as it left a huge procurement hurdle of well over half a million tons to be surmounted before the end of June but, effectively, most of the remaining plan would have to be fulfilled in two.
The Search for a New Method

months (March–April) because of the bad roads and the sowing season in May. This target was obviously discharged down to local level in some cases doubling the amount collected the previous year. For example, in Kamensk Okrug almost 69,000 tons had been collected in 1927/8 but, after the plan hikes early in 1929, a revised target was set at almost double this figure, and by the end of February over 98,000 tons had been collected.

It was against the background of tension and apprehension at the course of the procurement campaign that the Fourth Krai Party Conference convened in Novosibirsk from 25 February to 4 March with the ‘grain question’, and especially the problem of ‘how to take grain’, top of the agenda. In his opening address Syrtsov emphasized that the kulak’s share of marketable grain had increased significantly from the estimated 22 per cent in early January, and thus the main blow in the campaign should fall on them, particularly as a ‘significant part of the kulaks were sabotaging grain procurement’. It would, however, be ‘absolutely incorrect’ and ‘the politics of adventurism’ to follow those who sought a return to the ‘easy’ method of Article 107. There had been divisions in the party leadership over its use last year and, though it had proved effective then, the decision had been taken not to revert to it in the current campaign.

Syrtsov considered the basic problem to be one of organizational failure: ‘If last year grain procurement was carried out by us under the sign of taking grain surpluses by Article 107, then this year grain procurement must be carried out under the sign of taking away party cards from certain rural communists, who clearly have a surplus of these same party cards.’ He recommended the example of the Rubtsovsk party organization which had purged 15 to 17 per cent of its rural members as ‘kulakized communists’, as the way to deal with such ‘kulak agents’ and break the perverse ‘smychka’ between rural communists and kulaks.

Lauding the success of the measures of social influence pursued by the party, he observed how when individual supplementary self-taxation had been levied with the assistance of bedniaks and seredniaks not at 10 per cent but to levels of 30 to 40 to 50 per cent then procurement had been best. Goods boycotts of kulak non-sellers of grain had also produced ‘positive results’. Consequently, further pressure on the peasantry in the grain campaign was to be based on these measures with the carrying out of ‘social work’ among the bedniaks and seredniaks to mobilize their support in applying them.

Later in the conference, foreshadowing his speech to the Sixteenth Party Conference in April, he outlined and lent his support to the fundamental principles of Stalin’s ‘general line’. He explained the need for expropriating a ‘tribute’ (dan’) from the peasantry to finance industrialization, and criticized Bukharin’s labelling of this as ‘military-feudal exploitation’ of