

## Agriculture by Rosa Tennenbaum

### Russia facing mass starvation

*A report to the Russian Parliament attacks shock therapy economic policies as responsible for the crisis.*

**O**n Feb. 3, a special report was scheduled for presentation to the Russian Duma (parliament) which, according to advance accounts published in the London press, documents how the "shock therapy" of recent years has resulted in conditions of mass starvation.

While western pundits have been debating the various economic "models" for Russia and the former Soviet bloc, meantime, the proof of the insanity of the post-1989 "shock therapy" imposed by the International Monetary Fund is demonstrated in the collapse of output and mass suffering that ensued.

According to the Feb. 3 London *Guardian*, the report to the Duma was written by leading Russian economists for the attention of President Boris Yeltsin, and it is a "devastating critique of the social and economic effects of two years of [former Deputy Prime Minister] Yegor Gaidar's 'shock therapy,' which the West backed."

The report was written by the economic division of the Academy of Sciences, which pools the work of 10 of the country's top economic research institutions. Among the authors are Stanislav Shatalin, Leonid Abalkin, and Nikolai Petrakov.

It states bluntly: "The scale of economic and social misfortunes represents a real threat to national security. . . . This is the result of two years of shock therapy."

*Guardian* writer David Hearst gives this account of the report's conclusions on food and agriculture: "In 1990, food bills represented 30% of

average incomes. Today, a family spends 60 to 70% of its income feeding itself. Pensioners spend 83%, and for the one-third below the poverty line, that figure is a staggering 90%."

Hearst further states that the report "reveals that 15 million people, or one-tenth of the population, are estimated to be earning below 'starvation wages,' while one-third are below the poverty line. The wealthiest 10% are now 10.4 times as rich as the poorest 10%—a recipe for social conflict."

The effect on the demographics is staggering: "The number of deaths increased from 1.6 million in 1992 to 2.1 million in 1993. Average life expectancy in the last three years has decreased from 69.2 years to 66 years, while infant mortality has increased from 17.4 per 1,000 births to 19.1." Half the number of babies were born last year compared to 1989.

The report attacks Gaidar's price liberalization as having proved lethal for industry and consumer alike. The Russian producer is unable to pay debts or wages, and has literally run out of money. The authors call for a "mixed economy," claiming that only the state can support the key sectors of agriculture, transport, and oil and gas production needed to avert total collapse.

Besides the decline in agricultural output, far fewer food imports are going to the former Soviet Union. According to *Agra-Europe*, a West European farm journal, in 1993, Russia lowered its imports of grain by 62%, down to 11 million tons. Imports of meat sank by 75%, to 74,000 tons, and sugar by 30%, to 2.6 million tons.

All food imports together were 52% lower than the year before.

But the public "can't afford to eat." People aren't buying because of the drop in purchasing power. *Agra-Europe* estimates that consumption of meat went down by 25% last year, and of milk and milk products by 27% compared to 1990.

The Moscow weekly *Argumenty i Fakty* recently reported on the widespread malnutrition. Bread and potatoes have become the main diet in many Russian families. Over 1989 to 1993, meat consumption fell from 75 to 58 kg per capita per annum; milk and dairy products fell from 397 to 298 kg; vegetables fell from 91 to 77 kg; and fruit fell from 41 to 37 kg per capita. Not only did the amount of food consumed decline, but the quality of food is also much worse. Pig fat and bones, for example, are counted as "meat." A recent survey among Moscow students ages 10 to 15 showed that 50% do not consume milk or dairy products.

The situation with vegetable and fruit consumption is no better. Roughly 50% of young men drafted into the Army are disqualified even by the most lenient medical examination.

Recent studies in Bryansk and Kaluga *oblasts* showed that, respectively, 96% and 90% of the population suffer from vitamin deficiency. In the Kaluzhska region, 68% of inhabitants suffer severe vitamin deficiency which may lead to an outbreak of scurvy. The situation is no better in many other regions. Many people report that even in prisoner-of-war camps, food consumption was higher.

Aleksandr Saveryukha, Russian deputy minister for the food industry, promised at a meeting in Smolensk that the government in Moscow "wants to do anything possible to prevent the population from becoming completely impoverished."