

**2013 -2014 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM  
FINAL REPORT**

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*Khrushchev, Corn, and the Soviet Origins of Russia's Industrial-Agriculture  
Complex*

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**Research Abstract:**

The first archive-based history of Nikita S. Khrushchev's crusade to make Soviet farms world-class corn growers, my project examines how the USSR interacted with global trends in agriculture and technology, and explores how the Soviet system worked during the decade following Josef Stalin's death in 1953. Uncovering the rationale for Khrushchev's corn planting scheme and his larger farm program, my research details how Soviet experts found inspiration on farms in the United States and Western Europe. Khrushchev became fanatical about industrial farming, which privileged hybrid seeds, machines, herbicides, synthetic fertilizers, and other technologies to boost output and efficiency alike. These promised to make Soviet farms the socialist mirror images of their prolific American counterparts. Corn harvests would provide abundant feed for the livestock needed to raise output of meat, milk, and eggs. Only these could enrich Soviet citizens' relatively poor diet and make good on Khrushchev's Cold War-inspired pledge "to catch up to and surpass America." He hoped to further the socialist cause by offering socialism as a model of development superior to capitalism, and thereby winning over "hearts and minds" among the leaders and peoples of emerging Third World states. Studying corn as a component of industrial farming, as an object of policy-making, and as a commodity in the Soviet economy, my project sheds light on the workings of rural society, the farms themselves, and the governing apparatus. My inquiry shows how Khrushchev's corn crusade faltered due to the balky mechanisms of the planned economy, the rigid system of governance inherited from Stalin, Khrushchev's flaws as a leader, disobedient subordinates, and crises in farm labor and economics. This industrial farming scheme fell short of Khrushchev's lofty goals, leaving collective and state farms only partially remade, and corn an often-maligned result of his years in power.

## Research Goals:

During the grant period, my principle goal consisted of completing research needed to transform my dissertation, “Khrushchev’s Corn Crusade: The Industrial Ideal and Agricultural Practice in the Era of Post-Stalin Reform, 1953–1964,” into a book manuscript ready for publication. My proposed research trip was to last from mid-May to mid-August 2014, and to include archives in both Moscow and Kyiv. I envisioned expanding the source base relevant to both transnational and domestic parts of my analysis of Khrushchev’s corn crusade.

From the beginning of the trip until mid-July, I planned to visit central archives of the Communist Party and Soviet government in Moscow, namely the Russian State Archive for Contemporary History [*Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii*, or RGANI] and the Russian State Archive of the Economy [*Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv ekonomiki*, or RGAE]. I envisaged concentrating on Soviet officials’ efforts to develop contacts with agricultural practitioners, experts, and researchers in countries of the First, Second, and Third Worlds. During my year-long research trip lasting from 2011 to 2012, I privileged sources related to trips by experts specialists from the USSR Ministry of Agriculture to the United States, where they observed farms, purchased technologies, acquired seeds, and found inspiration in the advances in industrial farming then growing ever more dominant there. Although these contacts proved vital to understanding the inspirations for Khrushchev’s corn crusade, my focus on the United States caused me to pass by Soviet officials’ parallel efforts to learn methods in other countries of the First World, cooperate with partners in the Second World, and offer aid to the Third World. In carrying out additional research this summer, I aimed to fill out this underdeveloped part of my dissertation’s conclusions about Soviet leaders’ interests in foreign agricultural technologies and techniques, and commensurate efforts to promote their own experiences as a model for others.

During the final month of research, lasting until August 15, 2014, I planned to travel to Kyiv, where I would work in the Central State Archive of Public Organizations of Ukraine [*Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromads'kykh ob'iednan' Ukrainy*, or TsDAHOU]. This research promised to expand my understanding of governance practices and the actions of the bureaucracy implementing the corn crusade in this breadbasket region, which was key to Khrushchev’s scheme because of the climate, the farms’ productivity, and peasants’ comparative familiarity with corn. By building on the results of initial reconnaissance in the archive’s holdings in 2011, I hoped to shed light on how the local authorities responded to Khrushchev’s demands to plant ever more corn and commit Ukrainian farms to industrial agriculture. Regrettably, the ongoing political crises in Ukraine precipitated by the fall President Viktor F. Yanukovich, and prolonged by Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the separatist movement in the country’s eastern Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, have resulted in State Department–issued travel warnings restricting travel to the country. I therefore was unable to complete that portion of my research itinerary.

In its stead, I substituted two additional weeks in Moscow. Useful materials remain for me to discover in the party and government archives in Kyiv, but I was fortunately able to utilize the additional working days in Moscow. This period permitted me to expand the scope of my investigations in RGAE, and to examine useful holdings in the State Archive of the Russian Federation [*Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, GARF]. Although I had worked in each of these collections before, I had not exhausted them and found much fruitful material that will advance progress on my book project. Additionally, these final two weeks were fruitful in developing ideas for a future research agenda because materials I examined suggested potential lines of inquiry.

### **Research Activities:**

During the course of forty-five working days in the archives, I took extensive notes on a large number of files in eight distinct collections in three different archives. In RGANI, the archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, I delved into two separate collections (*fond 5, opisy 45 and 46*) pertaining to its Agricultural Department, and another consisting of materials from the General Department (*opis' 30*), which handled matters directly considered by the Presidium, as the Politburo was known from 1952 to 1966. In all, I was able to read seventy-four files (*dela*) in these collections. The documents within outlined how these organizations gathered information for party leaders, oversaw local party organizations as they implemented policy, and coordinated the efforts of ministries and other government bodies to develop and execute policies. Moving beyond the files that I read while working in the archive in 2012, I channeled my research in a new direction: I examined many files characterizing efforts by the Communist Party, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to gather information about developments in agriculture in Northern and Western Europe, as well as North America. Beginning in 1955, Soviet delegations traveled far and wide, visiting tractor factories in England, observing sheep shearing in New Zealand, and studying everything in between. Soviet authorities concurrently offered aid and expertise to allies in Eastern Europe and to the People's Republic of China. Finally, they tentatively developed contacts and showcased Soviet agricultural technology in Third World countries emerging as independent states. For instance, Soviet officials rushed to develop a presence at trade shows and exhibitions, such as an annual expo in New Dehli, destined to reach audiences unfamiliar with everyday Soviet reality. I also returned to themes familiar from my previous research, adding breadth to my examination of the Central Committee's management of domestic agricultural policy. Materials touched on efforts to develop laborsaving machines, to produce agricultural chemicals, to utilize synthetic fertilizers, and to adopt many related technologies. In addition, I concentrated on developments in the system of labor and pay on collective and state farms, an issue that proved particularly important in my dissertation. This additional investigation in RGANI in May and June give me confidence that I have examined the full range of sources the archive has to offer on Khrushchev's corn crusade.

From May until my final days in Moscow, I worked in the collections of RGAE. Greatly expanding on the research I had conducted in that archive in 2011 and 2012, I examined sixty files in all, most of them drawn from *fond* 7486, that of the Ministry of Agriculture. In *opis'* 22, which pertains to the Directorate of Technical Cooperation with Foreign Countries [*Upravlenie nauchno-tekhnicheskogo sotrudnichestva s zarubezhnymi stranami*], I found reports on Soviet experts' endeavors to expand ties with counterparts abroad. These efforts ranged from those outlined above to specific missions designed to secure membership in international agricultural organizations. For example, *delo* 119 contains materials dating from the mid-1950s that build the case for Soviet membership in the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO]. They outline the potential benefits of joining and suggest the specific purposes for Soviet decision-makers' approach to the organization. The *opis'* similarly contains reports submitted by Soviet experts sent to the People's Republic of China, where they examined the state of agricultural development and made recommendations for aid. In addition, they acquired samples of local crop varieties to ship back to the Soviet Union for use in breeding high-yielding, disease-immune, drought-resistant, and cold-hardy varieties of tea, corn, wheat, a myriad of vegetables, fruits, and other useful crops. Other officials undertook similar efforts in Poland, Albania, Bulgaria, and other friendly socialist countries of Eastern Europe. Still others traveled on a limited scale in Third World countries, especially India.

In *opis'* 7 of the same *fond*, I tapped statistical materials related to crop yields, harvests, the collective farms, their labor force, wages, and many other potentially useful categories. Outlining statistical trends for the whole country and for individual union republics and geographic regions, these may provide a potentially useful, if also problematic, alternative to heavily sanitized statistics published during the period. In the first analysis, the archived internal reports may allow me to augment and reinforce conclusions based on materials from party and government administrative organizations. They should shed light, for instance, on how Soviet authorities understood the results of corn planting in parts of Russia's North Caucasus, areas of Ukraine, and Moldova where the crop better suited the climate, and those of the north and east where it was an almost complete failure. In addition to the holdings from the Ministry of Agriculture, I examined a small number of the files of the Central Statistical Administration (*fond* 1562) offering similar information.

Finally, I delved into the previously unexamined files in *fond* 260, that of the All-Union Research Institute of Agricultural Economics [*Vsesoiuznyi nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut ekonomiki sel'skogo khoziaistva*, VNIIESKh]. This collection contained reports composed by the institute's economists and sent to policymakers in the Central Committee, the Council of Ministers, and the Ministry of Agriculture. These conveyed original research on many issues related to labor, pay, production costs, capital investment, and accounting practices. For instance, the researchers outlined practices and examined the benefits of the system of "intra-enterprise accounting," or *khozraschet*, an important development in the field of agricultural economics. These materials show how, prior to the mid-1950s, no one bothered to question or calculate how

much it cost to produce a given commodity. When researchers began to investigate, they found that it was impossible because of the haphazard wage, cost, and accounting systems, their findings spurred a range of labor and price reforms in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These practices indicate the importance of the ideal of industrial agriculture, which privileges efficiency and cost above all else in a way that earlier Soviet practices did not. The researchers' reports aid my project not only by presenting data on and analysis of real-world conditions, but also by preserving the conclusions conveyed in their correspondence with policy-making and administrative apparatuses. These documents thus shed light on the policy-making process, findings of considerable aid as I work to strengthen the conclusions outlined in chapter 7 of my dissertation, which concentrates on the pay collective farmers earned for their work and its overall effect on the productivity of Soviet farms.

Taking advantage of the unanticipated two weeks in Moscow, I returned to two collections in GARF, in which I took notes on thirty-two individual files. First, I examined additional files in *fond* R-5446, that of the USSR Council of Ministers general affairs department. These contain final policy resolutions, draft versions of those orders, commentaries from various bureaucratic organizations, and statistical and other supporting materials. Each file reflected the deliberations surrounding a specific policy directive: some were extraordinarily broad—one passed in 1956 outlining a new version of the charter governing every one of the tens of thousands of collective farms in the country. Others were exceedingly specific, as in the case of one governing the state purchase price of a few thousand tons of seeds for particular corn hybrids. These materials expand my understanding of the formal policies that went into Khrushchev's corn crusade and wider program to adopt industrial agriculture. In addition, some of these files shed light on Soviet efforts to develop industrial production of pre-prepared foods made from corn, potatoes, and other commodities using foreign technologies, a finding that reinforces some of the important themes of my research. This theme does not fit easily within the confines of my book project, and therefore my conclusions will form the basis for a useful article-length essay.

The second set of files in GARF I examined, in *fond* R-9477 and *fond* R-9527, pertain to organizations designed to inspect the activities of local administrative organizations, individual enterprises, collective farms, and state farms, ensuring that they carry out the policies of the central government with due diligence. The files of the Commission for State Oversight of the USSR Council of Ministers and the Committee for People's Oversight offer particular insight because they offer an alternative to the standard channels of reporting within the Communist Party and the Ministry of Agriculture. In those, officials often embellished the magnitude of their efforts and their successes. The inspectors, by contrast, turned a critical eye wherever they went as part of campaigns directed at the results of a particular policy, or in response to specific complaints of malfeasance. Their reports offer a useful avenue for moving beyond official policies to understanding their results in the republics, smaller administrative regions, and even "down on the farm."

### **Important Research Findings:**

This research will permit me to refine the main themes that I developed in my dissertation, strengthening its conclusions as I transform it into a book manuscript for publication. I have drawn some preliminary conclusions in two primary areas. As outlined above, Soviet officials engaged with international organizations such as the FAO, which the USSR joined in the mid-1950s. Research in RGANI and RGAE shows that Soviet experts sought new technologies, methods, machines, and management techniques on their travels to countries of Northern Europe, Western Europe, North America, and beyond. This will allow me to expand and strengthen this part of my dissertation, which focused on ties to the United States. More than anything, Soviet officials strove constantly to expand their knowledge of foreign innovations and to remedy the effects of isolation during the opening phases of the Cold War, the years between 1945 and 1955 that witnessed major innovations in agricultural technology and farm practices. Similarly, small numbers of experts got to know farmers, climate conditions, crop varieties in India, China, and beyond. In those cases, Soviet experts saw themselves not as learners, but as teachers, offering advanced technologies perfected at home in the USSR. These findings will permit me to develop a fuller understanding of the USSR's integration into a much larger set of technological changes in agriculture that, after emerging in the interwar period, transformed farms in industrialized nations. In time, these methods also contributed to rising yields achieved by farmers in Third World countries that came, by the late 1960s, to be known as the Green Revolution. My findings, therefore, add to a recent current in the scholarship that considers the Soviet Union a participant in worldwide trends and developments, rather than a society remaining self-imposed isolation behind the Iron Curtain. At the same time, my research reaches out to scholars studying agriculture and development on a global scale, who have neglected the Soviet Union's parallel and interconnected developments in the spheres of science, technology, hybrid seeds, genetics, agricultural chemicals, and more.

Furthermore, the policy-making documents, inspection reports, and statistics I uncovered in RGANI, RGAE, and GARF will help me build a fuller picture of how Khrushchev's corn-planting and industrial agriculture schemes became action at the local and farm level. Through the lens offered by corn, I focus on the local party committees and the farms themselves, showing how the program fared among the balky mechanisms driving the planned economy. I shed light on the rigid system of governance inherited from Josef Stalin, on Khrushchev's flaws as a leader, on disobedient subordinates, and on a crisis of farm labor and economics. In particular, the archival materials I examined this summer shed light on this last element. During my initial research in 2011–12, I did not fully appreciate how critical these elements were to the story. The research I completed with support of the Title VIII Research Scholar Program will permit me to make a more compelling and convincing case about these issues and to demonstrate how relevant they are to larger questions of the Soviet economy. These findings reinforce some of my earlier conclusions: Khrushchev's industrial farming scheme fell short of remaking the collective and state farms into socialist heavyweights. Leaving corn untended, the farms brought

in paltry harvests; resulting shortfalls of livestock feed made a mockery of Khrushchev's promises that the USSR would "catch up to and surpass America" in supplies of meat, milk, and butter almost overnight. A vicious circle developed in which local leaders had little faith in corn, put little effort into ensuring it was cultivated correctly, and thereby ensured that the benefits it might have offered remained unrealized. By 1964, Khrushchev's reforms had improved the lives of many, and made the farms incomparable to those inherited from Stalin. Yet the agricultural sector continued to hold the economy back under Khrushchev's successors, and its failings returned to beleaguer Mikhail Gorbachev's final effort to save Soviet socialism. By scrutinizing the corn crusade, my project illuminates the USSR's long-term development, explaining why the Soviet Union struggled to feed itself, and yet endured for decades. I expand our understanding of the postwar years by situating agriculture in its deserved place in the scholarship on the socialist economy, both areas vital to making sense of both the Khrushchev era and the entire period from 1945 to 1991.

The research I carried out this summer also suggested potential lines of inquiry sharing themes and subjects with my current project. First, I encountered documents and collections suggesting that the collective farm markets are a subject ripe for an inquiry using heretofore untapped archival sources. The collective-farm market was a physical space where individual peasants and representatives of collective farms—as well as shady characters the authorities labeled 'speculators'—sold produce. At various times white, gray, or black depending on state policy and the origins of the goods on offer, by the postwar period the markets achieved a certain acceptability. Although historians such as Julie Hessler have examined this subject during the years under Stalin, the decades-long evolution of this institution after 1945 remains almost uncharted territory. An economic and social history of the collective farm market from after World War II until the final years of the USSR's existence might capture how, for all of its antimarket rhetoric, the Soviet Union housed these markets alongside state property and ostensibly rational planning. At the least, officials acquiesced to the reality that it was in those markets that consumers acquired a small but significant proportion of their diet, and especially high-quality items such as fruits, berries, and even potatoes sometimes absent from state-run stores. An alternative project might examine loans and other financial instruments the State Bank extended to collective farms. While noted in the documents frequently, scholars have only rarely examined it. An odd phenomenon in light of Soviet principles of a state-owned and centrally planned economy, the practice highlights the legal separateness of the collective farms from the state economy.

### **Policy Implications and Recommendations:**

On August 7, 2014, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry A. Medvedev announced sweeping sanctions against imports from the United States, the European Union, and other countries that have imposed their own sanctions on the Russian Federation as measures in the ongoing diplomatic dispute surrounding Russian involvement in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Medvedev's action, not unlike the 2010 ban on grain exports I discussed in my research proposal, has implications

for foreign producers, world markets, domestic Russian producers, and domestic consumers. Although as of writing, the purpose and consequences of the policy remain unclear, it seems certain to bring into sharper relief the connections between society, politics, economics, and agriculture. For instance, this move could signal an attempt to achieve import substitution: Russia may replace foreign-produced foods—Finnish butter, Danish cheese, American chicken—by expanding domestic output. If this is the case, it will place additional demand on Russia’s land and farmers to become more productive using industrial farming technologies already in wide use. This cannot happen overnight, as agriculture runs on year-to-year and still longer cycles conditioned by weather, climate, and related natural processes. Therefore, analyses of Russia’s food supply that expand to encompass the history, geography, and economics of farm production are vital to understanding these sanctions’ consequences on Russia’s economy, social stability, and economy.

Although it may seem remote from the present, the history of Khrushchev’s agricultural reforms can inform policy because it underscores the enduring links between food, agriculture, society, and politics. When I proposed this research, I highlighted the potential for this connection to intensify in the twenty-first century due to the potential for unpredictable and capricious weather resulting from climate change. That possibility remains salient, even as the political conflict and Prime Minister Medvedev’s sanctions have brought to the forefront the importance of and contingent nature of agriculture and food. By elucidating the origins and history of Russia’s industrial farming sector and properly situating them within the context of global developments, my study offers lessons about the adaptability and power of industrial farming. Yet it also underscores the limits on the ability of technology to overcome climatic limits, underinvestment, and administrative roadblocks. Markets, competition, and agribusiness models make the rural economy that has developed in Russia in the last twenty-five years substantively different from its predecessor. However, the basic technological building blocks of that system were not tied to a particular economic system or ideology; instead, they were on hand after 1991, already existing in the agro-industrial complex inherited from the late Soviet period. These technical foundations, and the social, cultural, and political contexts that made them possible and limited their effectiveness in the goal of providing rich, abundant, and inexpensive food remain understudied. A study of the Soviet origins of Russia’s factory farms sheds light on the present by calling attention to steady, long-term developments in rural society and economics: falling population, increasing capital investment, and rising productivity per hectare, per worker, and per hour worked. In the present political situation, rising domestic production may cover the difference in Russians’ demands for butter, cheese, fruits, vegetables, and meat. However, this outcome is not guaranteed and will not come about by purely political means. It is therefore vital to observe not only the policies of the government, especially in the decentralized market conditions of Russia today, but also the economic incentives for farms to ramp up production. They cannot do this overnight, but instead require months and even years, during which consumers may lose patience with the limits the sanctions impose on the range of foods for sale in their supermarket.



### **Co-Curricular Activity:**

In addition to strictly research activities, the months I spent in Moscow proved fruitful in other spheres related to developing a career as an academic historian. I made new contacts in the field and maintained existing ones, including with peers among young historians and with senior scholars. For instance, I had fruitful discussions about the scope, scale, and significance of my project with Oscar Sanchez-Sibony of the University of Macau in China. His encouragement and scholarship have influenced my thinking on the economic and labor aspects of this corn crusade. In addition, I attended a conference on the Russia's involvement in World War I at the Higher School of Economics [*Vyshchaia shkola ekonomiki*] that, although not directly related to my own research topic, permitted me to meet some established historians and spurred my interest in teaching about these events. Together, these contacts open potential vistas for publishing, teaching positions, collaborative projects, conference panels, and many related professional endeavors.

### **Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications:**

The research I have completed this summer will without a doubt permit me to improve my larger research project, polishing and expanding my the conclusions of my dissertation and, thereby, making the book project stronger and more innovative. In the medium-to-long term, I will seek to complete the research necessary to the book project by undertaking my previously planned research trip to Kyiv. Of political conditions remain unstable in the summer of 2015, I may substitute a visit to the archives in Chisinau, Moldova. That location is a viable alternative because the Moldavian SSR, although much smaller, shared climatic, agrarian, and political conditions with neighboring Ukraine. In addition, even though I have never worked in them, I have been informed that the country's archives have become comparatively open to foreign researchers. This future research, its location notwithstanding, will permit me to bring the archival research phase of my project to a close. In the medium term, I will begin writing the initial chapters of the book, composing an introduction for it, and developing a proposal to send to prospective publishers.

In the short term, the research I completed during the grant period will enable me to strengthen the several articles in progress: recently, I learned that an article outlining the argument that the Soviet Union participated in the global trend toward industrial agriculture, which I wrote and submitted to the *Journal of World History* in late 2013, has been accepted for publication. In addition, the research I completed this summer will permit me to strengthen the article I have been writing about food. Using the example of potato chips, popcorn, and french-fries, it outlines how Soviet convenience foods emerged under Khrushchev under the influence of foreign models of industrial food production. I have drafted this article, and plan to send it to an appropriate journal in the coming weeks. Finally, materials I gathered during this trip will inform future research projects, as noted above.

## Conclusions:

This post-dissertation archival research and the opportunity to develop contacts with scholars proved immensely productive. The sources I have examined promise to reinforce my ability to bring my current project to fruition, making an innovative contribution to bodies of scholarship on postwar Soviet history and the global history of agriculture. In addition, the research I conducted has planted seeds for future research projects on related themes. These efforts, which I have outlined above, should prove invaluable in my professional development as I seek a tenure-track teaching position in the coming year.

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### **List of Archival Collections**

Russian State Archive of the Economy [RGAE]  
Ministry of Agriculture, *fond* 7486, *opisy* 7 and 22

Central Statistical Administration, *fond* 1562, *opis'* 324

All-Union Research Institute of Agricultural Economics, *fond* 260, *opis'* 2

Russian State Archive of Contemporary History [RGANI]  
Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, *fond* 5, *opisy* 30, 45, and 46

State Archive of the Russian Federation [GARF]

USSR Council of Ministers, *fond* R-5446

Commission of State Oversight of the USSR Council of Ministers, *fond* R-9477

Committee for People's Oversight, *fond* R-9527