

'Bab'ye Khozyaystvo': Poultry-Keeping and its Contribution to Peasant Income in pre-1914 Russia

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has cast doubt on the traditional view that the Russian peasantry experienced increasing impoverishment at the end of the nineteenth century. The extent to which the commune system was a major inhibitor of agricultural progress has also been questioned. By exploring the expansion of poultry keeping, traditionally the preserve of female peasants, this article suggests that in those provinces where the pressures on peasant living standards were most acute, poultry keeping was a buoyant source of on-farm income, which from the 1880s helped to maintain and even improve living standards at a time when peasant earnings from mainstream agricultural activity were experiencing downwards pressure. Despite their alleged conservatism Russian peasants demonstrated a marked awareness of the benefits of improved poultry strains, taking advantage of the greater availability of pedigree birds. Railway development enabled poultry products to make a significant contribution to Russia's export trade.

THE traditional view that the Russian peasantry experienced increasing impoverishment towards the end of the nineteenth century has been challenged in recent years by a number of western scholars and most notably by Professor James Simms. By pointing out that the increase in revenue from direct taxation increased more rapidly than the rate of duty on consumer goods he has sought to demonstrate a rise in per capita peasant consumption. The established pessimistic view has rested heavily on contemporary literary evidence, though not entirely so. It was given much force, for example by Alexander Gerschenkron's interpretation of the relative movement of population and grain production over the period 1870-1874/1896-1900 but, as Stephen Wheatcroft has shown, if the quinquennial base is moved one year either way to include a more typical bad harvest, then the per capita level of grain production net of exports equals or exceeds the rate of population increase.¹ So far the

Russian debate has been focused on the movement in consumption rather than earnings. This is very much to be expected. Satisfactory data on peasant earnings before 1914 are simply not available. The frequency with which male peasants, and indeed female peasants too, moved between work on their holdings and employment as industrial or agricultural workers or in another capacity makes computation of peasant income extremely problematic. What is clear, however, is that non-agricultural forms of employment were dominated by peasants from the Northern half of European Russia. Peasants in the provinces to the South of Moscow had to rely far more on sup-

of 1891: Soil Exhaustion, Technological Backwardness and Russia's Agrarian Crisis,' *Slav Rev.* 1982/2. For a useful summary of the views of Simm's critics see H Rogger, *Russia in the Age of Modernisation and Revolution, 1881-1917*, London and New York, 1983, pp 87-88 and J T Saunders, 'Once more into the Breach Dear Friends', *Slav Rev.* 1984/4. A Gerschenkron's analysis is in the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, VI, Pt 2, p 778 and S Wheatcroft's critique in E Kingston-Mann and T Mixter, *Peasant Economy, Culture, and Politics of European Russia, 1800-1921*, Princeton, NJ, 1991. For those acquainted with the standard of living debate in the history of the British working class in the first half of the nineteenth century this Russian debate might well evoke feelings of *déjà vu*.

¹ J Y Simms, jnr, 'The Crisis of Russian Agriculture at the End of the 19th Century,' *Slavic Review*, 1977/3 and 'The Crop Failure

plementing their incomes through seasonal work as agricultural labourers. And since a large proportion of Russia's agricultural producers were net consumers of grain, entry into the labour market or the selling of non-grain agricultural produce was vital to their economic well being.

Rose Glickman's recent study of Russian peasant women has emphasized their economic contribution to family income and the growth in that contribution as Russia's late nineteenth-century industrialization process disproportionately attracted male peasants into wage-earning activity off the land. Peasant women needed to earn money too but their relative lack of mobility arising from their child rearing responsibilities required them to combine their domestic duties with agriculture and other rural based economic activity. On the basis of local government (*zemstvo*) reports Glickman has drawn attention to the wide range of income sources available to peasant women throughout the Russian Empire. Missing from her study, however, is any consideration of poultry keeping's contribution to peasant income.²

It is contended below that this sector of Russian agriculture, which was extremely marginal until the 1880s, subsequently achieved such dynamic growth as to make a significant contribution to peasant living standards in those provinces favourable to its development. Furthermore, its expansion in the 1890s in parts of the Central Agricultural Region, the South-West and the Volga Region was arguably such as to require a minor qualification of the view that 'the poverty of the Russian market and the agrarian system within which the farmer was producing prevented any widespread diversification ...'.³ This traditional branch

of female peasant activity, of 'Bab'ye Khozyaystvo', was by the end of the nineteenth century beginning to acquire a commercial character. Many shortcomings still remained in 1914 but there is no gainsaying the buoyant contribution this subsidiary sector of Russian agriculture was making to Russia's foreign exchange earnings.

I

Until 1876 egg exporting had been carried out on a casual basis but thereafter as the journal *Promyshlennost' i Torgovlya* put it in 1911:

'Poultry from being the "baby" of our agriculture has become one of its largest sectors and a very important staple in our export trade'.⁴

Only oil could match the rate of increase that egg exports achieved in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. And between 1900 and 1913 the value of poultry products exported by Russia was equivalent to over one-third of the value of Russia's wheat exports. In years when wheat exports were low this could rise to 50 and even 58 per cent. It thereby acted as a useful cushion to depressed income from grain cultivation (See Table 1). And given that poultry keeping was much more associated with peasant farming than with estate farming and that the domestic market for poultry products was expanding rapidly by the end of the nineteenth century, the relative significance of poultry keeping to peasant earnings suggested by foreign trade statistics was arguably greater.

For the Russian authorities exports of poultry products were welcomed because they lessened dependence on grain and unlike grain exports they did not fluctuate wildly from year to year. Instead they largely followed a steady upwards trend

² R Glickman, 'Peasant Women and their Work', in B Eklof and S Frank, eds, *The World of the Russian Peasant: Post Emancipation Culture and Society*, 1990, pp 45-63.

³ M E Falkus, 'Russia and the International Wheat Trade, 1861-1914', *Economica*, Nov, 1968.

⁴ *Promyshlennost' i Torgovlya*, (Industry and Trade), June, 1911, No 11.

TABLE I
Russian Exports of Poultry Products, 1872-1914
 (Current Prices in Thousands of Roubles)

Year	(1) Eggs	(2) Live and Dead Poultry*	(3) Total of 1 + 2	Proportion of 3 in Total Exports %	Total as a Proportion of the Value of Wheat Exports %
1872	728	291	1019	0.3	1
1880	948	863	1811	0.3	2
1884	3076	1674	4751	0.8	4
1887	8153	3452	11,605	1.9	8
1898	31,486	7850	39,336	5.4	20
1899	28,829	7899	36,728	5.9	34
1900	31,545	8656	40,202	5.6	39
1901	35,544	9497	45,041	5.9	37
1902	38,804	8999	47,803	5.6	29
1903	51,330	9923	61,253	6.1	28
1904	54,475	9460	63,935	6.4	25
1905	61,070	9546	70,616	6.6	25
1906	56,329	10,867	67,195	6.1	32
1907	53,311	9966	63,278	6.0	41
1908	54,896	10,885	65,781	6.6	58
1909	62,277	12,146	74,422	5.2	19
1910	63,724	13,907	77,632	5.4	19
1911	80,794	14,071	94,865	6.0	37
1912	84,709	14,260	98,969	6.5	51
1913	90,707	16,023	106,730	7.0	47

* Includes feathers and down

Source: *Obzor Vneshney Torgovli*, (St Petersburg, Dept of Customs Collection, annually for appropriate years)

to become in the early twentieth century the Russian Empire's fourth or fifth largest export earner. Their role in converting low value grain into a high value export staple was deemed to be most important. Speaking in the early 1900s about the Russian livestock sector in general, one expert opined that:

'Perhaps the time is not far off when we shall not deliver wheat and rye to the international market but eggs and Siberian butter ...'.⁵

Certainly the provinces most closely associated with poultry production were for the most part either those, where the grain export market was believed to be

under most threat, or where in the late nineteenth century pressure on peasant living standards was considered to be most acute. The small but growing contribution of poultry keeping to peasant income from the 1880s onwards arguably helped to maintain or even improve living standards at a time when peasant earnings from some other sources were experiencing downwards pressure. Indeed, the poorer the peasant family, the higher was the proportion of income likely to come from poultry keeping.⁶ This suggests too that poultry keeping could operate as a risk-minimization strategy, pursued by the

⁵ A Bakhtiarov, 'Yaichnaya i Maslyanaya Birzha v Peterburge,' *Sel'skoye Khozyaystvo i Lesovodstvo*, ('The Egg and Butter Exchange in St Petersburg,' Agriculture and Forestry), 1907/4, p 75.

⁶ S P Urusov, 'Isledovaniye Sovremennogo Ptitsvodstva v Srednom Rayone Yevropeyskoy Rossii,' (Research into contemporary poultry keeping in the central region of European Russia), *Sel'skoye Khozyaystvo i Lesovodstvo*, 1896/11, p 609.

more economically vulnerable households. In Russia poultry farms were a rarity for most of the nineteenth century but for peasant households poultry breeding had long provided an important food source. With the exception of the extreme North virtually every peasant household kept a few hens and as the saying went: 'Without ten hens a peasant is not a farmer'.⁷

It was an activity that involved little effort and almost everywhere poultry was left to forage for itself. Only on rare occasions did owners feed their poultry and with low quality grain waste at that. In some areas peasants would even use horse manure as a constituent of poultry feed. As poultry keeping became more lucrative peasants in areas, where there was a plentiful supply of cheap grain, increased the productivity of their birds by giving them a more wholesome diet. But it was only at the end of the century that any serious attention was given to promoting the use of improved breeds that might better serve the growing domestic and international market. Hitherto peasants had kept mainly non-pedigree hens, and to a lesser extent ducks, geese and more rarely turkeys.⁸ Russian geese breeds, it might be added, were of a reasonable standard. The most widespread breed, the Fighting Goose, was characterized by its prolific breeding and the quality of its flesh. Ribbon Geese common in the southern provinces and Courland Geese, which were widespread in the Baltic region, were noted for their size and fleshiness. Ducks, which were bred in fairly large numbers, were usually of no distinct breed.⁹

Until 1861 those poultry farms which

did exist in Russia were more concerned with breeding birds for show and for cock fighting than they were with improving their commercial qualities. Then with the Emancipation of the Peasantry poultry breeding changed its character. With the end of free peasant labour many poultry farms which had been kept for the interests of the Lord rather than for economic purposes ceased to exist and those that remained were concentrated in the metropolitan provinces.¹⁰ Even so the exotic imported varieties bred by such farms for their decorative rather than their commercial qualities were superior to local breeds and they helped to improve the quality of local stock. Birds whose strain was not quite pure or whose features did not satisfy the high demands of fanciers would be sold off in the markets of the two capitals at prices well within the reach of small poultry breeders. From these pedigree birds there appeared numerous crossbreeds with far higher productivity than the non-pedigree birds previously associated with peasant agriculture. Furthermore, their eggs and meat fetched comparatively higher prices.¹¹

II

Until quite late into the nineteenth century the virtual absence of a domestic market for poultry products and the near impossibility of tapping the international market prior to the improved communications that railway development brought to Russia meant poultry keeping was initially slow to develop commercially. Nevertheless, it was able to benefit ultimately from the heightened interest in improving Russian poultry strains that is

⁷ S P Urusov, 'Ptitsvodstvo v Rayone Povol'zhya,' (Poultry keeping in the Volga region), *Sel'skoye Khozyaystvo i Lesovodstvo*, 1897/4, p 27.

⁸ Peasants kept mainly non-pedigree fowl plus ducks, geese and more rarely turkeys.

⁹ V Morachevsky in J N Lodijensky, ed, *Russia: Its Industries and Trade*, Glasgow International Exhibition, 1901, p 244.

¹⁰ V S Gulishamberov, *Mezhdunarodnaya Torgovlya Ptitsy i Ptich'imi Produktami* (The international trade in poultry and poultry products), St Petersburg, 1899, p 5.

¹¹ Urusov, 1896/11, *op cit*, p 610. The 'Boytsov' breed came to Russia from England, reputedly sent there by Lord Derby. It was most likely to have been the Old English Game variety.

discernible from the 1880s.¹² The Moscow Poultry Society was established in 1880, to be followed in 1885 by the Russian Poultry Society; in 1886 by the Riga Poultry Society; the Kazan and Kiev Societies in 1891; and in 1897 the South Russian Poultry Society.¹³ But it was the establishment in 1896 of the All-Russian Society of Poultry Farming, which was the most important landmark, since previous societies had not been primarily concerned with the promotion of commercial breeds. By the following year the society had forty branches and it contained within its ranks local people who were familiar with peasant poultry breeding.¹⁴ Paralleling this Society's educational role there were by the mid-1890s a number of commercial poultry breeders, mainly concentrated in the St Petersburg and Moscow regions and in the Baltic provinces, able to supply a wide variety of foreign pedigree birds. Such breeders sought to sell their output throughout the Russian Empire.¹⁵ The most widely available breeds were, as might be expected, dual-purpose varieties such as Cochins, Brahmas, Langshans, Wyandottes and Plymouth Rocks. Layers such as Hamburgs, 'Italians' [Paduas?], 'Spanish' [Andalusians and Minorcas?] and English Red Caps were also on offer, as were table birds such as Dorkings.¹⁶ But how far wide availability reflected popularity is uncertain. In the Moscow region, for example, the first commercially useful breed, the Cochin, only reached there from England in 1845, with the Light and then the Dark Brahma appearing somewhat later. Elsewhere, in the Volga area at least, the breeds most recommended by

specialists were Plymouth Rocks, Langshans and Dorkings, though the most popular with the peasantry were Cochins, Brahmas, Langshans and Minorcas.¹⁷ The drawback with Minorcas, however, was that they easily succumbed to the Russian winter and they were prone to disease.¹⁸

Despite their failure to appreciate fully the requirements of the foreign market they sought to supply, Russian peasants were very conscious of the enormous benefits to be gained by crossing domestic birds with foreign commercial breeds. They had in the opinion of late nineteenth-century Russia's leading poultry expert, Prince S Urusov, 'an absolute faith in the productivity of foreign birds about which they had heard so much from the agents of English firms'.¹⁹ In all probability this market-oriented source of improved breeds dwarfed the contribution made by large landowner poultry breeders to the improvement of peasant poultry strains. But from whatever source improvements flowed, what is so striking is the dramatic increases in output peasants could achieve in a short space of time in response to unfolding market opportunities. By the eve of the First World War the beneficial effects of this transformation were being felt in areas remote from the international market. A priest in Astrakhan province described how in the space of a year poultry rearing in his village was transformed. In 1913 he had bought four Plymouth Rock hens and a cockerel. The peasants bought eggs from him to rear their own birds, encouraged in this by a lecture given by an Astrakhan poultry fancier. In the space of a year poultry breeding there was revolutionized.²⁰

¹² Gulishamberov, *op cit*, pp 5-7.

¹³ Urusov, *op cit*, 1896/11, p 610.

¹⁴ Urusov, *op cit*, 1897/4 p 34.

¹⁵ S T Neyshube, *Torgovlya Domashneyu Ptitseyu i Dichiyn v Rossii*, (The trade in domestic poultry and game birds in Russia), St Petersburg, 1895, pp 3-17.

¹⁶ Urusov, *op cit*, *Passim*.

¹⁷ Morachevsky, *op cit*, p 244.

¹⁸ Urusov, *op cit*, 1897/4, p 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p 20.

²⁰ *Ptitsevodnoye Khozyaystvo*, (Poultry Farming), 1916, No 3.

III

In view of the importance of the market for the development of this branch of agriculture, progress throughout Russia was distinctly patchy with marked variations between and within provinces.²¹ But reliable and systematic data on pre-1914 production levels for the country as a whole, let alone for individual provinces, is non-existent. In northern Russia the severe climate was a constraint on commercial poultry keeping. The impossibility of keeping hens warm in winter unless they were brought inside the house restricted peasants to keeping about ten hens. Elsewhere regional differences and the level of commercialization were to a large extent accounted for by ease of access to markets, domestic as well as foreign. The Western Provinces with relatively speedy rail access to the German market specialized in the production of poultry meat. The Volga Provinces and Malorussia with less easily accessible markets for poultry meat in the Central Industrial Region and in Germany respectively, traded in eggs as well as poultry meat. While the South West and the South, which were more remote from foreign markets, concentrated on the production of eggs. On the eve of the First World War with the more widespread coverage of cold-store facilities and the slowly growing numbers of refrigerated wagons on the Russian railway system, the trend was for all regions to move towards a dual purpose marketing strategy, trading in both poultry meat and eggs.²²

Some idea of the relative importance of regions can be gleaned from railway

statistics, with foreign trade data giving an impression of the trend in aggregate output. Where such data are particularly defective is in indicating the proportion of output either retained on the farm or going for the domestic market. The widely differing estimates produced in the 1890s illustrate this well. The Ministry of Agriculture calculated that in 1895 the output of the poultry sector exceeded 59 million Roubles. Russia then had, it was estimated, 57 million head of poultry producing 4 billion eggs a year. These figures, however, were considered by some contemporary experts to be a gross underestimate. The value of output, for example, was arrived at simply by doubling the value of exports of poultry and poultry products. These data are far out of line with that compiled in 1897 by I I Abozin which suggested that Russia then had no less than 200 million head of fowls, 50 million ducks and 50 million geese; and an annual egg production of 12 billion of which ½ billion were exported. The reduced egg yields implied by Abozin's data suggests that included in his figures were immature birds being prepared for market. Poultry numbers would fluctuate wildly between summer and winter. In the late autumn and early winter birds would be slaughtered for market and numbers would be relatively low until chickens were hatched the following spring. The value of this domestic trade can only be guessed at. One contemporary expert complained that: 'On account of the low value of each individual bird, they were not taken into account in markets and yet their vast numbers mean it is a large scale trade'.²³

The bulk of the marketed eggs and poultry products consumed in Russia were usually taken to market by cart and an unknown quantity of eggs from the Volga

²¹ Urusov, *passim*. [The most valuable survey of pre-Revolutionary poultry breeding in Russia was carried out in 1895 by Prince S Urusov under the auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture and State Domains. Urusov's report graphically describes this agricultural sector in the more important poultry producing provinces at a time when it was expanding rapidly in response to the growing international and domestic market.]

²² M V Kechedzhi-Shapovalov, *Ptitsepromyshlennost' i Torgovlya Produktami Ptitsevodstva*, (The poultry business and the trade in poultry products), St Petersburg, 1912, p 20.

²³ I I Abozin, *Spravochnaya Kniga dlya Ptitsevodov*, (The poultry keepers' guidebook), St Petersburg, 1898, quoted in Gulishamberov, *op cit*, pp 1-9.

TABLE 2
The Distribution of Egg Loads on Russian Railways in 1908

Region	Millions of eggs	Proportion %
VOLGA [Saratov, Simbirsk, Samara, Tver, Penza, Kazan, Nizhgorod and Yaroslav]	750	26.0
CENTRAL AGRICULTURAL [Voronezh, Ryazan, Tula, Orel and Kursk]	672	24.3
SOUTH WEST [Podolya, Volynia and Kiev]	473	16.3
NEW RUSSIA [Bessarabia, Kherson, Taurid, Yekaterinoslav and Don Cossack Region]	433	15.0
MALORUSSIA [Kharkov, Chernigov and Poltava]	190	6.4
POLAND	140	4.6
URALS	136	4.6
CAUCASUS	59	2.0
LITHUANIA	29	1.0
BELORUSSIA	25	0.9
WESTERN SIBERIA	25	0.9

Source: M P Orlov in *Izvestiya Komiteta po Kholodil'nomu Delu*, 1908, No 2.

region both for the home and the export market reached St Petersburg via the River Neva. And despite its failure to record the enormous significance of Moscow province in supplying poultry products to the domestic market, or of the Baltic region, where poultry farming was most advanced, the data on railway freights given in Table 2 above gives a useful, if somewhat distorted, picture of the most important egg producing regions supplying the international market.

In the Moscow Province, which did not cater for the export market, the poultry trade also experienced rapid expansion in the late nineteenth century, thanks to growing demand in Moscow. Chickens, ducks and geese found a ready market and poultry fattening took on a commercial form with small enterprises being set up in and around Moscow to fatten pullets brought in from the countryside. The weekly market of breeding birds on the Trubnaya Square did much to improve the quality of local poultry and by the mid-1890s, the average number of eggs produced per bird was approaching 100 or more a year and weighing between 1.8

and 2.4 ounces.²⁴ The live weight of birds had increased to 5 lb. The weights and egg yields were almost double those of poultry in Tver Province, for example, where poor access to market delayed progress.²⁵

Elsewhere in the Central Industrial Region poultry-rearing was in a similarly backward state, though virtually all peasants kept a handful of hens. In Kaluga hens, ducks and geese were kept but those marketed were usually sent to Moscow for fattening. Similarly in some parts of Yaroslav and Kostroma so-called 'Rostovskiy capons' or 'Rostovskiy pullets' were fattened for the home market in Moscow and St Petersburg. In Vladimir province in the 1890s it was only in the Yur'yevskiy *uyezd* (district) that there was any serious interest in poultry keeping. Prince Urusov's 1895 report ascribed the weak development of poultry keeping in Vladimir Province to the climatic conditions and the fact that this was an industrial province, where the peasants 'lived by seasonal

²⁴ Bakhtiarov, *op cit*, p 85; Gulishamberov, *op cit*, p 32; and Urusov, *op cit*, 1896/11, pp 622-25.

²⁵ *Ibid*, pp 616-7.

work, doing little farming with the result that no one cared for the chickens'.²⁶

Further South in the Central Agricultural Region the stimulus of the international market was readily apparent by the mid-1890s. Cross breeding was the norm and the productivity of poultry was on a par with that in Moscow Province. In Voronezh Province, where 'noticeable improvements' were observed, numerous crosses were to be found with Langshans and Plymouth Rocks being popular. Peasant families kept on average twenty hens apiece and some indeed kept as many as 100 or more hens. Expansion continued with the result that in 1908 this province alone provided 10 per cent of the eggs despatched by rail for the export market.²⁷

Progress in the Volga province of Kazan was even more marked. On the eve of its rapid expansion in the mid-1890s Urusov had described poultry breeding here as:

'not commercially very significant, though of great help to the peasant economy. With growing output it has ceased to be regarded as "bab'ye khozyaystvo" and is being seen as a source of income'.²⁸

If Urusov is literally describing poultry keeping in Kazan as being no longer in the charge of women, this was untypical of Russia as a whole. Russian peasant women continued in the main to have full responsibility for poultry keeping. It is more likely that Urusov was indicating that the income from poultry keeping had become sufficiently large that it was no longer earmarked for the 'woman's box', income which peasant women by tradition had the unconditional right to spend as they wished.

Western dealers like the London firm, Robinson and Peacock, already had collec-

tion centres in the province and local buyers (*Skupshchiki*), who were usually Tatars, toured the countryside buying up eggs. They also obtained them from shops, where peasants frequently bartered them for small items. There was also a 'fairly large demand' from local soap making factories for small eggs unsuitable for the export trade.²⁹ In the mid-1890s 'an enormous quantity of eggs' was despatched from the quays along the Volga and the Kama rivers, partly for the domestic market but predominantly for offloading in Nizhny Novgorod for despatch by rail for the export market. In fact commercial poultry rearing was only weakly developed in Nizhny Novgorod Province and the high level of egg despatches recorded for it in Table 3 originated mainly from Kazan Province and the explosive growth of Kazan as an egg despatch point from 1896 was largely at its expense. In 1908 Kazan Province supplied about 8 per cent of Russia's egg exports and it was claimed in 1913 that the annual turnover for its egg trade was over 12 million roubles, which sometimes exceeded the amount of grain exported from the province.³⁰ Some of the eggs despatched from Kazan would have almost certainly come from other Volga provinces by water but the same could be said for grain despatches too.

By 1913 Kazan had yielded its position as the largest egg despatch station to Rybinsk, not because of any major expansion of egg production in Yaroslavl province, but through it becoming the major collection point for eggs produced in the Volga basin. In the years before 1914 Rybinsk despatched between 800,000 and 1,400,000 poods (one pood = 36.113 lb.) of eggs annually compared with an annual 600-800,000 poods leaving Kazan.³⁰ Much of Rybinsk's trade, however, would have

²⁶ *Ibid*, pp 621-22. Not that poultry-keeping was particularly time consuming. Only those peasants who fattened birds by hand feeding them with specially prepared mashes would have had to devote much time to it. And since this method of feeding was carried out in the late autumn and the early winter, it is unlikely to have caused much distraction from field work.

²⁷ Urusov, *op cit*, 1896/11, pp 635-640.

²⁸ Urusov, *op cit*, 1897/4, p 11.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p 17.

³⁰ N A Kryukov, *Yaytso i Yaichmoye Delo*, (Eggs and the Egg Business), Petrograd, 1915, p 45. Kozlov was by this time in third place, despatching 270-280,000 poods annually.

TABLE 3
Principal Despatch Centres for Eggs Transported by Rail, 1891-1897
(Egg Freights in thousands of Poods)

Railway Station	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897
Kazan	—	—	—	—	10	393	511
Nizhny Novgorod	460	316	373	309	527	311	452
Saguny (SE Railway)	178	90	74	149	347	276	230
Belgorod (Kazan-Kharkov Rlwy.)	40	42	102	158	252	263	226
Kozlov	144	148	120	159	259	256	247
Prokhorovka (Kazan-Kharkov)	236	201	204	271	320	250	219
Voronezh	111	54	58	110	226	194	234
Umary (Moscow-Kazan Rlwy.)	—	—	—	41	93	178	204
Romny	58	100	65	76	152	137	112
Livny (SE Railway)	57	36	50	62	101	85	90
Kel'tsy	118	111	78	99	91	79	81
Syzran	—	—	44	12	48	78	159

Source: S Gulishamberov, *Mezhdunarodnaya Torgovlya Ptitsy Ptich'imi Produktami*, (Dept of Trade and Manufactures, St Petersburg, 1899), p 32

originated in Kazan province. Indeed the rapid rise of Kazan Province as an exporter of poultry products convincingly demonstrates that by the 1890s, provided communications with the international market were adequate, the grain-based agrarian system, within which the Russian peasantry operated, did not necessarily act as a barrier to economic diversification. The growth in egg freights from Belgorod, Kozlov, Voronezh, Livny and Romny suggests the same was true for the provinces in the Central Agricultural Region. And that from Syzran serving Simbirsk province makes the same point for the Volga Region (See Table 3).

IV

Despite its dynamic growth peasant poultry keeping was by no means without its faults. Peasants, though quick to appreciate the benefits of pedigree crosses, were slow to appreciate the need to market their product in a form acceptable to the consumer. Eggs were usually sold to agents of the wholesale firms ungraded and unwashed and at a price which reflected that condition. Contemporary specialist literature roundly condemned

this practice. But this was very much in the interests of the middlemen, who could themselves clean and grade eggs and thereby sell them on at a premium. Russian peasants had 'no conception of the foreign market' and, it is suggested, few in the purchasing system had a vested interest in enlightening them. But it would not be entirely fair to place all or even most of the blame for this on the peasantry. Practical guidance was lacking. It was not until 1911 that instructors courses on poultry-keeping were organized by the Russian authorities.³¹

While foreign exporting firms such as Barselman of London had built up a network of collection centres, backed by cold stores, the Russian railway system was woefully inadequate in its delivery of poultry products to the export ports. It failed to provide adequately ventilated wagons for the transport of live birds with the result that unnecessary losses through suffocation occurred; it had too few refrigerated wagons available for the transport of eggs and dressed poultry in the summer period; its transit times to export points were too long; it took too

³¹ Kechedzhi-Shapovalov, *op cit*, p 4.

little care of the goods in its charge; and its freight rates were considered by the trade to be too high.²⁶ And though a major export port such as Riga had satisfactory facilities for the handling and storage of eggs, export firms were unhappy with the disorganization, neglect and carelessness at one of the busiest egg handling centres, the freight yard of St Petersburg's Nikolayaev Railway. Here one critic complained in the early 1900s that:

'Eggs are unloaded under an awning with sides open to the elements. Pigeons foul them from above and rats, which are abundant here, get at them from below.' Such was the resultant damage and mess, 'a case entered by a rat is no longer suitable for export'.²⁷

Evidently the Russian poultry business had a long way to go to reach its full potential. But despite its shortcomings it provided both a valuable food item for peasants throughout most of the Russian Empire and a growing source of income for those peasants in the chief poultry keeping regions such as the Baltic, the Central Agricultural Region, the Volga Provinces the South West and New Russia. Assessing with any accuracy the proportion of peasant income generated by this sector is, however, problematic. There was a general consensus amongst contemporary observers that the peasantry received half the value of eggs and poultry products exported from Russia.²⁸ To this would need to be added sales to the domestic market which grew from a very low level to become significant by the end of the last century. Of the eggs marketed in the mid-1890s the Ministry of Finance estimated three-quarters went to the home market.²⁹ But since the export trade took only grade one and two eggs, the prices commanded by eggs destined for the home market would have been

about 60 per cent of those for eggs to be exported.³⁰ The proportion of sales of live and dead poultry and of feather and down absorbed by the home market was probably at or above the same level as that for eggs. If that was the case peasant receipts from the poultry sector would have been very approximately in the order of 2½ million roubles in 1880; rising to over 16 million roubles in 1887; to over 56 million roubles in 1900; around 100 million roubles in 1905; and 150 million roubles in 1913.³¹ For important poultry keeping areas as the Central Agricultural Region and the Middle Volga Region this would have meant that annual aggregate receipts from poultry keeping per peasant household would have risen from a few kopeks in the 1880s to 7 and 10 roubles respectively by 1913.³² In 1908 the specialist journal, *Nasha Ptitsevodnaya Zhizn'*, estimated that in Voronezh Province the average annual income of presumably a peasant household accruing from the sale of poultry products was 22 Roubles 59 kopeks, which is not out of line with the above estimates.

Peasants living near to the cold stores of such British egg exporting firms as Barselmans were able to sell eggs and birds to the value of 100 to 150 Roubles a year. It was, the journal observed 'a very significant component in peasant income'.³³ Others made the same point. It was suggested in 1913 that peasants could easily make 1½ to 2 Roubles profit a year from a single hen. And there were small peasant farmers in Podolya and other provinces who were making between 120 and 150 Roubles a year from egg sales, it was claimed, an enormous business for a

²⁶ Bakhtiarov, *op cit*, pp 88-90.

²⁷ A E Kulyzhnyy, *Derevenskaya Kooperatsiya*, (Rural cooperatives), Moscow, 1913, p 110; and Gulishamberov, *op cit*, p 1.

²⁸ Neyshube, *op cit*, p 1.

²⁹ Bakhtiarov, *op cit*, p 79.

³⁰ This is broadly in line with estimates made by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1895. 59 million +, itself regarded as an underestimate. Gulishamberov, *op cit*, p 1.

³¹ These estimates are calculated on the basis of half the value of exports accruing to the peasantry plus 180 per cent of that amount to account for returns from domestic sales.

³² *Nasha Ptitsevodnaya Zhizn'*, (Our poultry farmer's life), 1908/9-10.

small peasant.³⁹ Given that the average annual wage for a seasonal agricultural worker in these regions in the early twentieth century was about 60 Roubles, the economic benefits of poultry keeping would appear to be attractive, the more especially since the outlay of both capital and labour was so insignificant. Such returns become even more apparent when related to an individual peasant farmer electing to keep poultry on a more serious commercial basis. Prince Urusov's 1895 survey made this very clear. He emphasized the dramatic productivity increases that ensued from crossing local non-pedigree birds with West European pedigree strains. The first crosses would produce a bird with a live weight of 5 to 7 lb., laying an annual average of 125 eggs weighing around 2¾ oz. each. That compared with the average weight of native Russian birds of 2½ to 3 lb. and their average annual lay of 75 eggs, weighing an average of 2 oz. each.⁴⁰ In terms of weight of both birds and eggs productivity could be more than doubled in the space of a year. And because the eggs from pedigree crosses were more acceptable to the export market the financial return was correspondingly greater.⁴¹

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And more extravagant claims were made for the economic potential of poultry keeping. In a self-education book published in 1912, there was a graphic account of high returns this sector of agriculture could yield.⁴² It pointed out that a dozen good hens could give no less income than a desyatina (2.7 acres) of grain. From a desyatina of the best yielding grain (winter wheat) the annual harvest was usually about 50 poods and worth a Rouble a

pood. Eight poods of grain had to be set aside for seed giving 42 Roubles of marketable grain to which could be added a small sum for the value of the straw. On the other hand 12 hens would lay about 1000 eggs from which 200 would need to be subtracted for breakages and hatching. That would give 800 eggs and 120 chickens for the market. Egg sales would yield 13 Roubles 60 kopeks and sales of pullets 60 Roubles, giving a gross return of 73 Roubles and 60 kopeks. After subtracting a sum for feedstuffs the return would be equivalent to that from a desyatina of winter wheat and what is more it was a branch of agriculture that could be carried out on any peasant farm, not even one-tenth of a desyatina of land being required for the purpose. And the figure quoted related to average quality poultry. If better quality birds were kept, it was claimed, the net returns from a dozen hens could be between 175 and 235 Roubles, with each hen giving between 15 and 20 Roubles, which was equivalent to half the income of a desyatina of winter wheat. The income to be gained from keeping 20 or 30 hens, the book enthused, could be double or even treble these amounts.⁴³ Arguably there was an element of hyperbole in the above example but it does serve to illustrate the enthusiasm felt in some quarters for a sector of agriculture that could convert low-value grain into a much more valuable product.

For the vast majority of Russian peasants poultry-keeping remained a subsidiary sector of agriculture, demanding little in the way of capital and only minimal inputs of labour. It had by no means reached its full potential by 1914. Yet in those provinces where poultry-keeping was most advanced it was contributing to family income a sum equivalent to

³⁹ Kulyzhnyy, *op cit*, p 115.

⁴⁰ Converted from zolotnikovs on basis of 1 zolotnikov = .15 oz.

⁴¹ Urusov, *op cit*, 1897/4, p 33.

⁴² Kechedzhi-Shapovalov, *op cit*, pp 6-8.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p 8. The author also waxed lyrical on the qualities of hen manure. It had 4 times the fertilizer value of cow and horse manure and was ideal for use under fruit trees and for grain crops.

between a quarter and a half of that which might be earned by one labourer over the course of a year from seasonal agricultural work. It was, moreover, a contribution to family income which barely featured two decades earlier. And since it was a branch of agriculture that could be carried out regardless of the size of the peasant plot, the possibility remains that it made

a disproportionately larger contribution to the incomes of poorer peasant families. It could operate too as a risk-minimization strategy largely independent of the constraints imposed by the commune system. In any event it is a branch of pre-1914 Russian agriculture and a source of peasant income that ought not to be ignored.

Notes and Comments

CONFERENCES

The Society's 1992 Spring Conference will be held on Monday 13 to Wednesday 15 April at Florence Boot Hall, University of Nottingham. The conference will include a full programme of distinguished speakers and an expedition to the only remaining open-field village in England at Laxton in Nottinghamshire, led by Professor John Beckett who has written extensively on the village in *A History of Laxton, England's Last Open-Field Village*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989. Further details and booking forms for the conference can be obtained from Professor J V Beckett, Department of History, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD.

The Society will hold an autumn conference in association with the Centre for East Anglian Studies, University of East Anglia in September 1992. The conference will have a regional orientation and be about the farming and rural history of the Fenlands and East Anglia. The local organizer will be Dr B A Holderness, Department of Economic and Social Studies, University of East Anglia,

Norwich NR4 7TJ. Information can also be obtained by our autumn conference co-ordinator, Dr Richard Hoyle, 13 Parker Street, Oxford, OX4 1TD.

The Society will be holding its one day Winter Conference in 1992 on Saturday 5 December at the Institute of Historical Research in London. The theme will be the forthcoming Vol VII of *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, 1850-1914*. The 1993 Spring Conference will be held at Gregynog Hall, near Welshpool, Clwyd from Monday 5 to Wednesday 7 April. Further details of both these meetings will be announced in future numbers of the *Review*.

40TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE SOCIETY

This will be held at 9.00 a.m. on Tuesday 14 April 1992 during the Spring Conference at Florence Boot Hall, University of Nottingham. The business will include the election officers and new committee members, as well as important proposed changes to the constitution of the Society (outlined in the last issue, pp 190-1). Members are urged to attend.