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# What Replaced the Kolkhozes and Sovkhozes? A Political Ecology of Agricultural Change in Post-Soviet Russia

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What Replaced the *Kolkhozes* and *Sovkhozes*?  
A Political Ecology of Agricultural Change in Post-Soviet Russia



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30 April 2007

**Abstract**

Russian agriculture underwent drastic changes after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. A large-scale collective system, with a planned economy, was expected to enter the market economy rapidly with the help of new legislation and programs. Things did not go as the central Russian government and international development organizations had planned. Instead of joining the global capitalist system, rural Russians turned to small private plots and practiced subsistence agriculture for survival. Some people attempted to start private farms but were often not successful because of a lack of capital and structural support. Other enterprises remained variations of collective farms, but without as much state support as before their productivity declined. Overall during the 1990s agricultural output fell sharply. This paper examines why Russian agriculture, specifically in rural Siberia, has thus far not been able to join the larger global market. It employs the lens of political ecology with a specific focus on the role of the Russian state and distance, both physical and political.

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## Preface

### Russian Terms

Before discussing agriculture in Russia, a few Russian concepts need to be defined and clarified. When transliterating Russian terms in this paper, the Library of Congress system will be used, except in instances where words are commonly known in another transliteration. For example the region Buriaitia will be spelled Buryatia.

The Russian term for a private plot is *lichnoe podsobnoe khoziaistvo*. *Lichnoe* means personal, which is an interesting word choice because the plots were often cultivated by and provided for the entire family, thus not making them personal, in the American sense of the word (Polubina, 2002). *Podsobnoe* means helping or assisting and *khaziaistvo* has a variety of meanings in Russian. The current definition of *khaziaistvo* from the Contemporary Dictionary of Russian Language states that it is in one sense an economy, in another sense the goods that are necessary for life, and finally work at home and the organization of domestic life. In the Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language, an older dictionary, the main definition of *khaziaistvo* stresses the art of housekeeping and the household. *Khaziaistvo* to rural Russians today often means the household, including their private plots, livestock, outbuildings and house. Family is also related to this concept, because the *khaziaistvo* provides for the family; and it is only successful if the family puts effort into the *khaziaistvo*. After looking at each definition of *lichnoe podsobnoe khaziaistvo* one can understand that it has a greater connotation than simply a private plot. It goes beyond personal agriculture to encompass a large sector of the rural economy and lifestyle. Scholars also use the terms personal plot and kitchen garden to refer to *lichnoe podsobnoe khaziaistvo*. The term kitchen garden emphasizes

the connection of the plots to the home and household (Rowe, 2002). In this paper *lichnoe podsobnoe khoziaistvo* will be referred to as a private plot, since it is the most common term encountered in the English literature about the subject.

*Lichnoe podsobnoe khoziaistvo* is not the only Russian phrase for private plots. *Priusadebnyi uchastok* and *ogorod* are also related terms. *Priusadebnyi* refers to something that is next to the farm or farmhouse; *uchastok* is a plot of land. Thus *priusadebnyi uchastok* is a plot of land adjoining the peasant's property. Yet private plots are not always located right next to a person's property, so this term does not literally refer to all private plots. Another word used to define to a private plot is *ogorod*, which can be defined as a "plot of land or garden beds where vegetables are grown, usually not far from the house or dwelling" (Shvedova, 1992). *Ogorod* literally describes what a private plot is, but *lichnoe podsobnoe khoziaistvo* has both a deeper connotation and is the bureaucratic term employed in legislation and government statistics.

When studying Russian agriculture during the Soviet period, one must also define *kolkhoz*, and *sovkhos*, which are both forms of collective agriculture. *Kolkhoz* comes from the Russian word *kollektivnoe*, collective, and *khosiaistvo*, thus it could be considered a collective household or economy. *Kolkhozes* were "economic and social units" which were forced to deliver a certain amount of foodstuffs to the state and *kolkhoz* employees were known as *kolkhozniks*. Government planning commissions determined the amount of foodstuffs that needed to be produced, and the *kolkhozes* were forced to comply with their production allotments (Kirchner, 1991). Another key element of the collective agricultural system and command economy was the emphasis of quantity over quality. Although *kolkhozes* were forced to comply with the state's demands, they



had a greater level of freedom and autonomy than *sovkhoses*. *Sovkhoses* differed from *kolkhozes* because they were state-run enterprises with salaried employees. A goal of Soviet agriculture was to have all *kolkhozes* eventually turn into *sovkhoses*, thus having the state in total control of agricultural production (Kirchner, 1991). *Kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses* were more than just large farms; they provided local infrastructure and social services in the villages (Wegren, 1998).

After the collapse of the Soviet agricultural system, subsistence agriculture has become more common across the Russian countryside. The Russian word for subsistence agriculture is *natural'noe selskoe khoziaistvo*. Literally translated, *natural'noe selskoe khoziaistvo* means the natural village household. People have practiced subsistence agriculture in Russia for hundreds of years. The Russian phrase suggests how ingrained into the culture it is. When analyzing Russian agriculture today it is important to remember to that Russian subsistence agriculture is conceptualized as a natural rural activity.

Another important term when discussing agriculture relates to how land is quantified. In Russia, land is often measured in *sotkas*. A *sotka*, literally hundredth part, is one hundred square meters, one one-hundredth of a hectare. Thus if someone cultivates sixty *sotkas* he or she cultivates 0.6 of a hectare. *Sotka* is a convenient measure when discussing private plots because such plots are generally less than one hectare in size, so a smaller scale is more useful.

Finally, when talking about transportation in Russia a *marshrutka* needs to be defined. A *marshrutka* is a common form of mass transportation throughout Russia since the era of *perestroika*. Public transportation was not as reliable after the collapse of the

Soviet Union, so people stepped in and started to operate *marshrutkas*. They are a common feature in city landscapes, but also provide villages with a connection to nearby urban areas. A *marshrutka* is a minivan with room for about fourteen passengers following a set route; people are shuttled wherever they need to go along the route. To get a *marshrutka* to stop where one wants, the passenger must shout the stop at the driver. *Marshrutkas* can be considered a combination of a bus and a taxi because they will stop wherever wanted, but they follow a set route and are shared with other people.

## Introduction

Almost overnight Russia switched from being a communist republic in the Soviet Union to an independent country attempting to secure its place in the global capitalist system. With this transformation came great changes in all aspects of life, especially in regard to agricultural production. The state and international development organizations hoped the means of agricultural production would change from large-scale collective operations to thriving smaller private farms. Private farms were not as successful in the transition as the Russian state and international development agencies had hoped, and another form of agriculture became the leading producer. The void left behind by the *kolkhozes*, collective farms and *sovkhozes*, state farms, is now being filled by subsistence agriculture, although the government, international development organizations, and some rural Russians would prefer to practice another form of agriculture.

Russia is the world's largest country in terms of land area and has much potential for a large agricultural output, even though it has faced difficult times during the 1990s. Because of its northern location only 7.1 percent of its land is arable, but 7.1 percent of Russia's land is equivalent to about 125 million hectares, which provides a large area to grow a variety of crops (Central Intelligence Agency, 2007, Csaki, 2002). But Russia is not living up to its agricultural potential, and has actually started importing a high percentage of its food. In 1997, Russia was the world's largest importer of poultry, not something one would expect from a country that was once a world superpower and has so much potentially productive agricultural land (Wegren, 2005). Since 1991, agricultural production has actually decreased across the country, and Russia is now caught between a

rural population returning to subsistence farming, while the government and international development organizations are hoping for Russia to enter the global economy.

This paper seeks to analyze how Russian agriculture has changed after the fall of the Soviet Union, as well as examine how the new agriculture reforms from Moscow have been implemented in the Republic of Buryatia, a marginal region of Eastern Siberia, by using a political ecology framework. A large body of literature exists on the transition in post-Soviet countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union, but these works tend to focus on political and democratic development and economic change. Not as much attention has been given to human environment interactions or agricultural change. Political ecology has rarely been used as a tool for analysis in the post-Soviet world.

The political ecology framework will need some slight adjustments, since its traditional focus has not been on the post-Soviet world. These adjustments include viewing the state as a more powerful actor than in some Third World countries, and reexamining the relationship between the state and international development organizations. Because the state has more power, it has different relationships with international development organizations and regions within the country. The differing relations within Russia are in part due to both the physical and political distance separating Moscow from the remote areas of the country, including Siberia. This distance has contributed to the rise of subsistence farming, because people in rural areas are often left with no other livelihood strategies. Russian agriculture has not been able to join the global capitalist system because new private farms are not receiving state support and governmental programs have not been implemented. Therefore, rural Russians are

practicing subsistence agriculture and acting against the dominant narrative of small capitalist private farms.

The analytical focus of this work is a small village, Desyatnikovo, in the Republic of Buryatia. Desyatnikovo is an idiosyncratic place because it is an Old Believer (a religious minority) group within a larger Buryat ethnic republic. Because of this, the findings about agriculture in Desyatnikovo and Buryatia in general may not be entirely applicable to greater areas of Russia. Agriculture in Desyatnikovo is still important because it is part of Russia today and some of the findings are similar to other accounts of Russian agriculture in different locations. Desyatnikovo provides an example of a place being overlooked by a central government because it lacks political power and is geographically isolated.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter One provides clarification of Russian agricultural terms, the Soviet historical context, and a background to the legislation and important events that have occurred since 1991. From this chapter it is clear that subsistence agriculture has a long tradition in Russia. Chapter Two focuses on political ecology and specific issues that arise when attempting to apply the current framework of political ecology to the post-Soviet world and how to address those issues. The chapter also discusses the importance of place and distance when analyzing agricultural change in post-Soviet Russia. In order to better understand the agricultural change at a small scale, Chapter Three examines Siberia and the Republic of Buryatia. Siberia faces great political distance when attempting to interact with Moscow and this chapter discusses how that distance affects agriculture in the area. A Buryat village is also used as a case study for agricultural change, which provides the ability to compare

and contrast agriculture in Desyatnikovo with another village in the same republic.

Chapter Four discusses agricultural change within the older generation in Desyatnikovo

and Chapter Five is an analysis of the situation in Desyatnikovo. This analysis

problematizes the dominant narrative about private farming and discusses varying views

about subsistence agriculture. Finally, the thesis ends with a brief conclusion discussing

subsistence farming and the future of agriculture in Russia.

## **Chapter 1: Russian Historical Context**

### **Soviet Historical Context**

To understand Russian agriculture today and its recent transition, one must have a basic understanding of the history of Russian agriculture during the twentieth century. In the beginning of the twentieth century, several decades after the liberation of the serfs by Alexander II, subsistence agriculture was common among peasants in the countryside. The peasants' main goal was to produce enough food to feed themselves and their families (Lewin, 1994). After the 1917 revolution, the new Soviet government hoped to change the form of agriculture to large-scale collective production. On October 26, 1917 the government issued the Decree on Land that banned private property and the private selling, leasing or mortgaging of land (O'Brien and Wegren, 2002). Thus all land became public property and not something that could be bought, sold, leased or owned. The 1922 Land Code stated that the land would "belong" to everyone and be used by the people who worked on it (O'Brien and Wegren, 2002). These decrees were mainly theoretical, and did not have a major impact on rural life at the time. Legislation also bound peasants to the land. Soviet citizens were given passports which granted them the freedom to travel around and move to different places within the country. Peasants were not granted passports and thus tied to the land, facing a situation similar to the serfdom experienced in previous centuries.

Beginning in 1929, Soviet agriculture was collectivized under the leadership of Stalin. The goal of the Stalinist government was to industrialize agriculture, along with other sectors of Soviet society. Another goal was to have greater political and social control over the rural population (O'Brien and Wegren, 2002). During collectivization,

agricultural production was organized into large-scale agricultural enterprises, *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*. Peasants were forced to turn over their land and livestock to the government. Previously held property became part of *kolkhozes* or *sovkhozes*.

A few years into the collectivization process, the Soviet leadership realized that collectivization was not going as well as hoped. The peasants often reacted angrily to the forced seizure of land and herds, slaughtering much of their livestock before it could be turned over to the state. Famine plagued the countryside and the entire agricultural sector was in economic decline. Therefore, some incentives were given to appease the peasantry in order to improve and ease the collectivization process. The goal of the incentives was that the peasants would join the new farms with less resistance. The losses in livestock hurt the Soviet economy, so the government decided to allow every household to farm a small piece of land between one quarter and half a hectare in size, known as a private plot, and raise a limited amount of livestock, including cows sheep and pigs (Stalin, 1931).

After receiving the incentives, more peasants chose to both become part of the state agricultural system, while to continuing practice subsistence agriculture. So much personal livestock was kept in the 1930s that the majority of animal products produced in the Soviet Union came from personal livestock (Lewin, 1994). Peasants were less resistant to the new collective system as long as they could have access to a small amount of land and continue to raise animals. These aspects of their previous life granted them a certain degree of independence from the state.

The private plots provided more foodstuffs for the peasants than the *kolkhozes* could. *Kolkhozniks* had more incentive to work on their private plots than the *kolkhoz*,



since the private plots were *kolkhozniks'* main food source (Rowe, 2002). In the late 1930s peasants worked twice as much on their private plots than they did on the *kolkhozes*, and by 1938 it was estimated that forty-five percent of farm output in the Soviet Union came from 3.9% of the sown land, which was the area allotted to private plots (Lewin, 1994). The extra work on the private plots allowed people to grow most of the potatoes and vegetables they needed, and their personal livestock provided them with the majority of the animal foodstuffs they used. It was estimated that during this time the personal plot was responsible for producing about fifty two percent of potatoes, half of the cattle, seventy one percent of the milk, seventy percent of the meat and forty three percent the wool of the Soviet Union (Lewin, 1994). These statistics show that *kolkhozniks* were able to feed themselves from private plots, which suggests that private plots were the peasants' main priority.

Giving *kolkhozniks* this limited land tenure and thus enabling them to harvest their own private plots and raise their own livestock is not something one would expect to find in a communist society. In a communist system, the state is expected to provide for everyone's basic needs. When dealing with the countryside, the Soviet state took the opposite approach by having the peasants cultivate land for personal use and making them responsible for their own food (O'Brien and Wegren, 2002).

State agricultural policy started to change under Khrushchev. From 1953 to 1958, Khrushchev's goal was to increase production from private plots (O'Brien and Wegren, 2002). Khrushchev also allowed *kolkhozniks* to receive monetary compensation, which increased their purchasing power and allowed them to keep some savings. With their savings, peasants had the opportunity to buy a tractor, car, or other useful items, which

made cultivating and harvesting the private plots easier. Because of the monetary compensation, private plots were no longer the “key element of survival,” but people still continued to use them as a food source (Fitzpatrick, 1994). With money, people had the opportunity to buy products at local stores, depending on the available selection. The stores often only had a limited selection of poor quality products, so people continued to grow their own vegetables and potatoes, and raise their own livestock. Because workers received cash, Khrushchev decreased the allotted size of private plots. Theoretically *kolkhozniks* no longer needed to produce as much food from subsistence agriculture. This measure was overturned once Khrushchev fell from power (Fitzpatrick, 1994).

In the beginning of the 1960s, *kolkhozniks* were finally granted passports. Thus, they could leave the *kolkhoz* and move into urban areas. This influx of people to cities provided a challenge for the Soviet government, which had to feed a larger urban population. Sufficient food was not always available. To compensate for this deficit, some of the urban population would travel back to their families’ private plots and return to the city with potatoes, vegetables and dairy products. Thus, although people no longer lived in the rural areas, they were still dependent to a certain degree on the private plot of family members who remained in the countryside (Interviews 11/05).

Throughout the rest of the Soviet period, the basic form of collective agriculture remained the same, although some minor reforms were passed. State regulations defining the private plots varied, but rural residents were always allowed some degree of independence regarding their subsistence agriculture. Agricultural workers were able to maintain a certain degree of power because they were never completely dependent on the state for their food needs. Also, the state did not completely change their previous

lifestyle, although it did somewhat alter it by requiring rural residents to practice subsistence agriculture, while also working long hours on the *kolkhozes* or *sovkhozes*.

Agricultural policy began to shift with the Gorbachev administration in the 1980s. Gorbachev offered greater support to personal agriculture, although he also believed that collective agriculture was still a valid idea and that the system just needed to be fixed (O'Brien and Wegren, 2002). Because Gorbachev believed in the collective system, his reforms worked within the system rather than trying to completely reorganize it (Wegren, 1998).

Gorbachev was correct in believing that the collective agricultural system was not producing as well as it could. In the late 1980s, some of the yield rotted away because of a lack of storage facilities, or was not harvested in time because of mechanical failures. The *kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz* fields were often not given enough attention, because workers were focusing on feeding themselves on their private plots (Feshbach and Friendly, 1992). Because the system did not efficiently use the inputs given by the state, the agricultural sector was an extremely expensive enterprise for the state to run (Wegren, 1998). Also, little state investment was given to the agricultural sector after Khrushchev (Rowe, 2002). It is important to note that the reforms and restructuring of the agricultural sector in the early 1990s were not dismantling a thriving system, but were rather trying to improve upon an inefficient and faltering system.

### **Collective Agriculture and the Environment**

Before considering the effects of the transition from a communist to a market economy, one must understand the old agricultural system in order to compare it with the new. Agriculture, like other industries in the Soviet Union, was inefficient and often

poorly managed. A reliable labor force was not always present, and machinery was often not kept in proper working order (Feshbach and Friendly, 1992). Soviet collective agriculture functioned on a large scale and fed the Soviet population, but it also contributed to environmental degradation across the country, in part because of its ideology of emphasizing quantity over quality.

Three aspects of the Soviet agricultural policy, mechanization, attempts at soil improvement, and the intense use of chemicals, all contributed to the environmental problems (Bridges and Bridges, 1996). By focusing on technological fixes for agricultural problems, rather than sustainable solutions, the long-term viability and potential of the land was often compromised. Because the government wanted the *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* to produce more, field size was sometimes increased without regard to the natural environment. To increase field size and maximize agricultural output, natural vegetation was cut down, river systems altered and the landscape flattened (Wolfson, 1993). Also to increase production, fertilizers and pesticides were applied to fields at extremely high rates; this extensive use contributed to water pollution, as the contaminated soil eroded into nearby waterways. Chemicals were used excessively because the Soviet state thought that technology was the best solution for agricultural problems. The fertilizers and pesticides were not always applied properly, exacerbating the environmental degradation. Instead of helping the land, it was slowly being poisoned (Feshbach and Friendly, 1992).

Another aspect of the environmental degradation is the diminished soil quality and fertility, which occurred across the Soviet Union. A 1988 estimate stated that 157 million hectares of soil had become salinized. Parts of central and southern Russia, as

well as southern Siberia have been greatly affected by soil erosion (Bridges and Bridges, 1996). The degradation of soil is also a major problem in the *chernozem* (black earth) region in the central European part of Russia. This region was one of the most agriculturally successful, but is now facing a loss in the productivity of the precious soil (Kochurov, 1995). The diminished soil quality has resulted from a variety of factors, including monocropping of cotton and other crops, the intense use of chemical inputs, and erosion due to wind and water (Bridges and Bridges, 1996). Transforming agriculture into a new successful enterprise today is more difficult because of the environmental constraints. Some areas now receive lower financial returns for agricultural products because of the poor soil quality and fertility (Bridges and Bridges, 1996).

Overall, the environmental picture left by Soviet agriculture is bleak. The years of technological rather than sustainable solutions took their toll. The new system has inherited the old problems, making the task of reforming and transforming Russian agriculture harder. Agriculture in the Soviet Union spread across 1.5 billion acres, but by 1989 the quality of the land was severely compromised. Areas had become marginal, rocky, saline, eroded or swampy (Feshbach and Friendly, 1992). Some authors have suggested that the environmental problems caused from the Soviet agricultural system could be considered an “ecological collapse” or “ecocide” (Bridges and Bridges, 1996, Feshbach and Friendly, 1992).

### **Transition from Soviet Collective Agriculture to Russian Agriculture**

#### *New Legislation and Agricultural Producers*

The Russian agricultural sector started to change drastically with the Yeltsin administration. Changes brought by the new regime included land privatization and

agrarian reforms (Wegren, 2005). Although Yeltsin did drastically alter the shape of Russian agriculture, his goal was never to decollectivize the system completely. His legislation allowed for a portion of the industry to remain collective, although not technically state run. Yeltsin wanted the main producer of agricultural products to be the private sector, rather than the state (Wegren, 2005). In December, Yeltsin signed a decree that “allowed collective and state farm members to withdraw from their parent farm with land shares and property shares” (Wegren, 2005: 66). In the beginning of the restructuring process, the old *kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses* were not equally divided among the workers, but a decree in September 1992 required the equal distribution of resources. The recipients of the new land shares could exchange or lease their rights to them, but the right to buy and sell land was still restricted (Wegren, 2005).

Another state reform from December 1991 was “On the Procedure for the Reorganization of Collective and State Farms.” This resolution “instructed all state and collective farms to re-register themselves by the end of March 1992, and if the farm was unprofitable, to reorganize” (Wegren, 2005: 66). The time period for reorganization was eventually extended to January 1994. The *kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses* had four options for their new structure. Unprofitable farms, which included about ten percent of all Soviet *kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses*, were required to dissolve completely. The farm was to be divided among the workers and totally disbanded (Wegren, 1998). Although the farms were officially disbanded, once the redistribution was complete individual farmers could join together to form smaller collective operations. Data from the time show that forming a smaller collective enterprise among private farmers was not a popular choice (Wegren, 1998). The second option was to remain a *kolkhoz*. This choice was possible because in

March of 1992 Yeltsin signed another decree saying that farms could keep their collective status if their members voted to approve the status of remaining a *kolkhoz*. The government enacted this decree because it did not make political or economic sense to have all of the large farms disband, since they were still producing much of the food for the country (Wegren, 2005).

The third and fourth options for reorganization were to form either an open or closed joint-stock company. Because these concepts were foreign to many former *kolkhoz* and *sovkhos* workers, people who understood the process found themselves in powerful positions and had advantages over those who did not understand the options. In the open joint-stock company, persons inside and outside of the *kolkhoz* could purchase stock in the operation with their land or property shares. In a closed joint-stock company, only prior members of the *kolkhoz* had the opportunity to purchase stock in the new enterprise (Abrahams, 1996). The joint stock farms still had close economic connections with the state. These farm employees were eligible for state pensions because the joint stock farms still contributed to the state pension fund. In addition to state pensions, these farms received state subsidies and had to produce a certain amount for state use. Also, workers on joint stock farms were considered to be working in the state sector, rather than the private (Wegren, 1998). Data from the time period shows that the most popular option for restructuring was the closed joint-stock company, with 47 percent of the former collective and state farms choosing that option (Abrahams, 1996). Because most of the former *sovkhoses* and *kolkhoses* remained closely connected to the state, it appears that very little transformation actually occurred, and the change that officially happened took place on paper instead of on the ground.

In order to decide what type of enterprise to become, meetings were held on the *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*. Who held the power during the meetings often determined what type of restructuring the farm underwent, if any at all. The people in charge of the meetings often held important positions on the farms under Soviet rule, and their new task was to explain the complicated restructuring process to the rest of the farm workers. Understanding the process was crucial, because during the reorganization, a farm employee had a one-time opportunity to take his share of land from the farm before it was restructured. This, in theory, should have helped many people start private farms, one of Yeltsin's goals, but often people were not aware of the option or could not take advantage of it because of pressure from the other farm members. Thus very little land was actually redistributed, and most of the agricultural land remained part of large collective operations (Wegren, 1998).

Another major piece of legislation occurred in October 1993, when President Yeltsin signed a decree, which "instructed that members of state and collective farms were to receive a certificate of land ownership entitling them to a share of the farm's land" (Wegren, 2005: 67). Workers who received the certificates also had the right to sell their land, although it still needed to be used for agriculture (Wegren, 2005). After Yeltsin's decrees land was privatized, but since the large collective enterprises were allowed to remain intact, not much appeared to change in the countryside. This apparent lack of change was problematic when combined with the economic system, which changed drastically during the same time period.



*Shock Therapy and the Transition into a Market Economy*

During the Soviet period, *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* were given specific quotas to meet, and all of their production was planned, stressing quantity over quality. They automatically had a buyer for their products and a fixed price for their goods. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the certainty and security vanished, and new agricultural organizations had to survive in the market economy. This sudden forced entrance into the market economy was known as shock therapy. Shock therapy was supposed to satisfy two goals of the new government: the first was to facilitate the rapid transition into capitalism and build new markets: the second was to prevent the Communists from regaining power (Wegren, 2005).

Although the Communists were unable to regain power at the national level, past communist leaders of the intact collective operations kept their powerful positions. Also, the transition into the capitalist system proved difficult for the agricultural sector. The larger collective farms no longer had the monopoly over domestic food production they enjoyed during the Soviet period, and were unable to compete with cheaper prices and better quality of food imported from the United States, the European Union and China (Wegren, 2005). The transition to the market economy actually witnessed a decrease in the output of goods. A forty five percent decrease in agricultural output was estimated from 1992 to 1998 when compared with 1990 levels (Wegren, 2005). Overall output of the agricultural sector declined, but rural Russians were still finding ways to feed themselves.

*New Types of Agricultural Actors: The Winners and Losers*

Three main types of agricultural actors have emerged from the agricultural transition of the 1990s: the individual household practicing subsistence agriculture on private plots, larger private farms and finally the large-scale collective enterprises. Although there are three main types of actors, the lines between them are sometimes blurry. For example, someone practicing subsistence agriculture may produce some extra food and sell it along the roadside or at a local market; but the subsistence producers are mainly concerned with providing food for the familial unit. This unit includes family members living in rural areas, but also includes relatives living farther away that help with the agriculture and use some of the food as well. Also, private farmers produce food for their own consumption, and workers on the collective enterprises may still practice subsistence agriculture in addition to being part of a collective enterprise. Even though the classification of the agricultural actors is not entirely distinct, it is still useful because the statistics from the time use these categories, and the overall goal of each type of actor is different.

Before the redistribution of land in 1990, almost 99 percent of arable land was part of either a *kolkhoz* or a *sovkhov*, and 1.3 percent of the land was allocated to private plots. By 1996, the redistribution had changed the percentages substantially. *Sovkhoz*es and *kolkhoz*es were twenty nine percent of the arable land, cooperatives and joint stock companies accounted for fifty nine percent, private farms were seven percent, and household plots (including collective orchards and vegetable gardens) were five percent. *Sovkhoz*es and *kolkhoz*es still had a fairly substantial percentage of the land because

many, especially in Siberia, did not disband until later in the 1990s (see chapters four and five for specific examples) (Mudahar, 1998).

Because the collective operations and private farms had more land available to them, it seems as if they would be the best producers. Yet, the best producers were the individual households. These producers practiced subsistence agriculture, although they sometimes produced a little extra to sell at a nearby market or along the roadside. These agricultural endeavors produced different products than the larger scale farms. At the household level, people mainly produced fruit, vegetables, potatoes and some animal products. The large-scale enterprises produced grain, sunflower seed, sugarbeets, meat, milk, and eggs (Mudahar, 1998). This difference in production makes sense when one considers that households had only a few hectares or less available to them, while the larger farms were operating on thousands of hectares. Household production was meant to meet families' food needs rather than be sold competitively on a market.

Even though a main goal of the Yeltsin government was to create a thriving sector of private farms, in the end private farmers often found it too difficult to make a profit and survive. In order to attract people to the private farming sector, the government offered a variety of incentives including free land, moving expense grants, and a five-year land tax exemption. People took advantage of these opportunities and the number of private farms increased from 50,000 in January of 1992 to 284,000 in July of 1994 (O'Brien and Wegren, 2002). Many people who did take advantage of the governmental incentives were unable to stay in business and in 2000 the number of private farms decreased to 260,000 (which in all employed between 800,000 and 900,000 people) (Wegren, 2005).

The number of farms may have decreased, but the amount of land used by private farms has increased. The average mean size of a private farm increased from 1992 to 2004 (Wegren, 2005). This trend seems to indicate that some private farms have been successful and able to consolidate and increase their land, while others have been forced out of business. Although Russian agriculture differs from other systems around the world, the trend of the successful farms becoming larger at the expense of the smaller farms is a common occurrence in countries with market economies.

The number of private farms decreased for a variety of reasons, including the high cost of machinery and inputs. The 1990s witnessed serious de-capitalization of the agricultural sector as the amount of farm machinery used decreased dramatically. In 1990, 143,700 tractors were acquired; only 6,416 were purchased in 1998. The number of trucks purchased fell from 97,600 in 1990 to 980 in 1998 and the number of grain combines fell from 37,800 in 1990 to 717 in 1998 (O'Brien and Wegren, 2002). This decrease in the acquisition of farm machinery shows that people could not afford to buy and use machinery on their farms, and is a reason for the increase in subsistence agriculture. Machinery and equipment from the collective system is still present in rural areas, but is not being used in most current farming operations. Depending on the size of the farm, the old equipment from the *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* may not have been appropriate because they were designed for very large-scale farming. Also, since much of the machinery was manufactured during Soviet times, spare parts are no longer available to repair broken machines. Therefore, it is not uncommon to see fields of combines and tractors rusting away, while local villagers struggle with small farming enterprises. The de-capitalization of the agricultural sector is not unique to Russia. It has happened and is

still occurring across the former Soviet Union. Some scholars have coined the term “de-modernization” to describe the situation (Rowe, 2002).

Another difficulty private farms face is the rising cost of inputs such as fertilizer, electricity and fuel. Because of the skyrocketing prices, the use of inputs has plummeted. According to statistics from the World Bank, between 1991 and 1999 overall agricultural inputs increased in price by eight times, making them exceedingly difficult for farmers to afford. Even if a farmer was able to afford some type of machinery, the price for fuel and lubricants increased by 17.4 times, so it was often too expensive to operate. In 1990, 11.3 million tons of gasoline were used, but in 2000 this number was reduced to 1.8 million tons. The use of mineral fertilizers also drastically decreased, which led the World Bank to wonder about the future fertility levels of Russian soil (Csaki, 2002). Environmentally speaking, the decrease in the use of fertilizers may in fact be a positive development for the land since chemical inputs were used excessively during the Soviet period and caused a great deal of environmental degradation.

Many people did attempt to start private farms, but an important question to consider is why others chose to stay part of a collective system and not attempt to start a private farm. Although the government did offer incentives to those trying to start private farms, the incentives were often not enough to compensate for high costs and lack of inputs. Therefore, some farmers chose not to leave the *kolkhoz* in the first place. Even those who wanted to leave the organization to start a private farm faced difficulties from within the *kolkhoz*. Early requests to leave the farm were brought before the head of the farm. A general meeting for farm members followed and a final decision was made within a month. This system put the leaders of the farms in powerful positions, because

they could prevent people from leaving the farm, which caused less land to be available for private farms. The leaders of the farms also kept their powerful positions since they remained in charge of large collective operations (Wegren, 1998). Often it was easier for peasants to simply increase the size of their personal plot rather than start a small-scale private farm (O'Brien and Wegren, 2002).

The lack of social services outside of *kolkhozes* is another reason that some farmers remained part of collective system rather than becoming independent farmers. Social services were a part of the *kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses*, but when the *kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses* reorganized the services were often lost. The government has not stepped in to adequately fill the void. The new collective enterprises offered workers the services that they were able to, giving villagers a strong incentive to remain part of the collective organization (Wegren, 1998).

The demographics of the rural population also affect the number of people who chose to start private farms. As of 1990 two-thirds of the Russian population lived in urban areas, compared to half in 1961 and one-third in 1940 (Feshbach and Friendly, 1992). Today, the largely urban population, seventy three percent of the total population, means that there are fewer people living in rural areas to start private farming operations. In addition, the total Russian population is decreasing at alarming rates. Besides the diminishing population, the age and gender of rural residents also contributes to the situation. Most rural residents are elderly women, while the majority of people who choose to start private farms are men between thirty and forty years old (Wegren, 1998). Besides migration to the cities, the rural population itself has declined since 1992, because deaths are now outnumbering births in the countryside (Wegren, 2005). Because

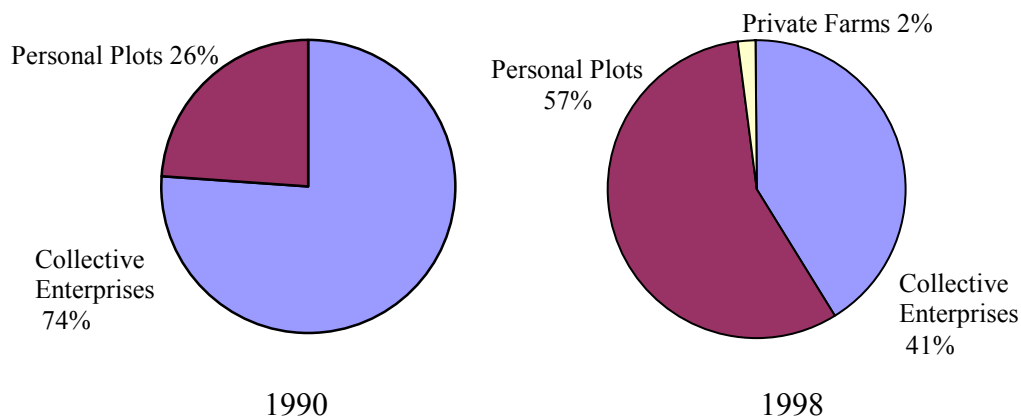
of the population decline in rural areas, fewer attempts are made at starting private farms. Since Russia's total population overall is declining, a lack of a rural workforce could be a potential problem and will make sustaining private farms more difficult.

After looking at the role of the large collective organizations and household production, it appears that private farms were the losers during the economic transition. One World Bank report estimates that their contribution in 2000 to the agricultural sector was three percent of the output, although this number did increase from only one percent in 1992 (Csaki, 2002). Yeltsin's goal of having private farmers as the economic backbone of the agricultural sector has not been realized, fifteen years after the initial reforms. Although Yeltsin hoped that private farms would be the main producers, his goal of having production come from the private sector rather than the state did materialize because of the increase in private plot production. This production however is focused on subsistence rather than profit in a market system.

After 1992, six million hectares of land were used for personal plots, a fifty percent increase from the 1970s (O'Brien and Wegren, 2002). The three million new hectares allotted for private plots went to increase the size of existing plots and to create some new ones (O'Brien and Wegren, 2002). World Bank surveys show that private plot size in five Russian provinces increased from 0.24 hectares in 1990 to 0.35 hectares in 1994, an increase of almost fifty percent, although they still remained less than half a hectare (O'Brien and Wegren, 2002). In 1994, private plots were producing forty six percent of the gross agricultural product on only 3.3% of the arable land (O'Brien and Wegren, 2002). Even though the government had hoped private farms would dominate agricultural production, private plots were still the most productive in Russia, especially

when considering the proportion of total land cultivated. The percentage of agricultural outputs produced on the personal plots actually increased from twenty six percent in 1990 to fifty seven percent in 1998. The collective enterprises still had a firm place in the Russia agricultural sector, but their outputs decreased from 1990 to 1998.

**Figure 1.1**  
**Structure of Agricultural Production in Russia Based on Market Value of Agricultural Commodities, 1990 and 1998 (O'Brien, 2002: 371) (Data from Moscow: Goskomstat, 1998).**



Whether or not reforms have been successful is still debated when discussing the agricultural transition. The World Bank argues that the reforms have not been effective because much of the agricultural sector is still not part of the market economy and production is coming from single households practicing subsistence agriculture. On the other hand, Stephen Wegren, who has spent a great deal of time studying Russian agriculture and has published numerous works on the subject, argues that the reforms have been successful, because change has occurred in the countryside, especially with regard to the behavior of the rural population (Wegren, 2005). Both sides argue that current household production will not be the future of Russian agriculture, and that private farms will eventually become the leading producers. This is not a new idea, since it was the hope of the Yeltsin administration. By looking at the Russian countryside one can still see that this notion has not been fulfilled. The actors advocating it as the answer



for the future of Russian agriculture have thus far not provided adequate solutions, or have been unable to implement them at the local level in rural areas.

## **Chapter Two: Political Ecology in the Post-Soviet World**

Russian agriculture has experienced a major transition since the collapse of the Soviet Union. By focusing on place and the connections between places, and actors at various scales, including the national, republic, and village levels, one can see how the larger economic and political structures affect rural places, which is a key element of political ecology. The World Bank and Russian government want Russia's small private farms to become part of the global economic system, and view the current subsistence farming in a negative light. Because of their powerful positions, the World Bank and Russian state have been able to express their opinions to a wider audience and thus help spread the negative perceptions of subsistence agriculture (Mudahar, 1998, Bonanno, 1998). Political ecology is important because it does not assume that the only correct and successful solution is to join the capitalist market, but instead takes into account local peoples' thoughts and looks to find alternative livelihood strategies.

The Russian government has attempted to reform and change the agricultural sector, but thus far the reforms have not worked as planned. By using geography, and specifically political ecology, one can better understand why the reforms are not working. The failure of the reforms can be seen by focusing on place, the distance between places, including the relationship between core and periphery, and by examining the roles of various actors in the transition, including the Russian state and international development organizations (Robbins, 2004; Peet and Watts, 1996).

When attempting to analyze and understand the transition of post-Soviet agriculture, geography provides valuable insights. Examples of these insights include discussing economically successful farm and village locations, as well as the role of

transportation in determining the type of agriculture in a given place and its profitability. By focusing on place and distance, both in a physical and political sense, geography allows one to see the effect of place on local agriculture. Russian agriculture is an appropriate topic for geography because one of the traditional areas of geographic study is human and environment interaction (Napton, 1989).

### **History of Political Ecology and Definitions**

Political ecology is important for the study of Russian agriculture because it takes into account globalization and the impact of entrance or lack of entrance into the global market economy (Sutton and Anderson, 2004). Political ecology also attempts to explain environmental degradation and marginalization by looking for the ultimate causes and seeing rural places as part of larger structures (Robbins, 2004). It developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in part as a response to cultural ecology and the need to look at similar issues with regard to connections with larger political and economic structures (Peet and Watts, 1996). Cultural ecology developed in the 1960s as an alternative to modernization theory, and is mainly concerned with small-scale subsistence communities. The discipline has close ties with anthropology (Netting, 1977). Political ecology emerged as a response to and complement of cultural ecology, because some scholars felt that cultural ecology was not encompassing the entire situation of a community, in part because analysis was taking place at the village scale (Zimmerer and Bassett, 2003). These academics believed that focusing solely on the community as a system rather than on the connections that the community had with larger political and economic structures was problematic. In a world where globalization was starting to play a more prominent role, connections between local communities and larger powerful

structures could not be ignored as they were in the so-called “apolitical” geography (Robbins, 2004). Therefore, political ecology began to study human environment interactions within the context of globalization. Attention was also given to how different political and economic systems impact the environment in various places as well as varying land use patterns. (Stott and Sullivan, 2000). Although political ecology developed with a common goal, it has come to mean different things to different scholars, and many definitions of the subfield have developed.

Political ecology provides valuable insight into agricultural change, but some problems arise when attempting to apply the entire framework and all of its definitions to Russia. Paul Robbins, in his book Political Ecology nicely summarizes a variety of definitions of the field, but applying them in the Russian context poses some problems. One of the most commonly cited definitions of political ecology is from Blaikie and Brookfield, which states that political ecology “combines the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political economy. Together this encompasses the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources, and also within classes and groups within society itself” (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987: 17, in Robbins, 2004: 6). This idea of political ecology is applicable to the Russian agricultural situation because the relationship between society and land-based resources can be applied to the changing agricultural production systems. The final part of the definition allows for analysis of discrepancies amongst the local population, which have been sometimes overlooked in past political ecology work (Stott and Sullivan, 2000).

In 2000, Stott and Sullivan presented another useful definition of political ecology. They wrote that political ecology “identified the political circumstances that

forced people into activities which caused environmental degradation in the absence of alternative possibilities...” which stems from work done by Piers Blaikie (Stott and Sullivan, 2000: 4). This definition is important when studying post-Soviet Russia, because rural residents have found themselves without a wide range of options after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Therefore at times they have caused environmental degradation in order to survive. Often no alternatives exist besides practicing subsistence farming, because attempts at larger farming operations are not always successful and people must find a way to feed themselves.

Another useful part of the definition presented by Stott and Sullivan is that political ecology “...involved the query and reframing of accepted environmental narratives, particularly those directed via international environment development discourses” (Stott and Sullivan, 2000: 4). This definition is important when analyzing the Russian agricultural transition because it leads one to question the dominant narratives and think critically about what is actually happening at the local scale. Findings at a local scale may contradict what the actors who hold the power are saying, but that disconnect is important. With regard to Russian agriculture, the powerful actors, such as the Russian state and international development organizations, are lobbying for private farms and entrance into the global economic system. While private farms entering into the international market economy is not necessarily a negative idea, this definition allows for other narratives to be suggested and for the dominant narrative to be problematized.

The two definitions above do not envelop the entire field of political ecology, but are some of the most applicable to the unique situation of Russia and the post-Soviet world. For the purpose of this paper, political ecology is used as an analytical tool to

examine how current governmental agricultural policies have affected rural Russian agricultural practices and production. One cannot understand the current situation of Russian agriculture without looking at the broader political and economic structures and their impact on the Russian countryside, especially in such remote areas as Siberia. Along with looking at the relationships between the larger structures and the countryside, political ecology will also be a means to question the larger developmental assumptions with regard to the Russian agricultural system, and give a voice to rural Russians, who are less powerful and often overlooked.

Political ecology has not traditionally focused on the post-Soviet world, but using the framework in a different region provides new insight into important issues. It also presents some problems. Traditionally political ecology has focused on the third world, and increasing attention is now being given to the first world; but the post-Soviet world is not receiving as much attention. Academics have noticed the limited scope of past political ecology work and are calling for attention to be focused to other environments and locations (Robbins, 2004, Zimmerer and Bassett, 2003). Robbins specifically suggests that attention should be given to the Eastern European transition, because it has not been the focus of much past research (Robbins, 2004).

Some scholars have studied the post-Soviet world using the tools of political and cultural ecology. The dissertation “It Didn’t Used to be this Way”: Households, Resources, and Economic Transformation in Tunka Valley, Buriatia, Russian Federation by Katherine Metzger provides valuable insight for the Buryatia case study and the agricultural transition. Few researchers have focused on the agricultural changes in Siberia, and finding research from the same republic greatly adds to the understanding of

how agriculture has changed in Buryatia. Other dissertations using political and cultural ecology in the post-Soviet world include William Rowe's work, On the Edge of Empires: the Hisor Valley of Tajikistan and Susan Crate's dissertation, Cows, Kin and Capitalism: the Cultural Ecology of Viliui Sakha in the Post-Socialist Era. Political ecology has also been used to examine the agricultural transition in China, although Muldavin's finding of peasants switching to cash crops does not appear to be occurring in Russia (Muldavin, 1997).

Political ecology is important when examining the case of Russian agriculture because it aims to give a voice to all of the actors involved, and examines how political policies and structures affect land use and environmental conditions. Much of the literature about the agricultural transition in Russia focuses on the broad policies and goals, rather than seeing how those policies and goals have been implemented on the ground and affected local populations. Using political ecology allows one to examine both broad policy initiatives and the actual situation at a local level, thus providing a more complete picture of agrarian practices. Secondly, political policies and land use in Russia are inextricably linked, and the shape of agriculture changed dramatically after the fall of the Soviet Union, in large part due to changing governmental policies. Because of the changing social, economic and political system, agriculture went from a large industrial collective enterprise to a system searching for its place within national and international markets.

Because political ecology has not traditionally studied the post-Soviet world, its theories and theses often do not apply as aptly as they have in first and third world contexts. Although they may not apply in the same way, political ecology is nonetheless

useful because it challenges assumptions and brings new ideas to the current discussion. Robbins identifies four main themes of political ecology research: degradation and marginalization, environmental conflict, conservation and control, and environmental identity and social movement (Robbins, 2004). The focus of this paper is to understand how land use patterns have changed because of governmental policies and development goals in the agricultural sector and how that change has affected peoples' daily lives. Thus the degradation and marginalization theme seems most applicable to Russia's case; but it cannot be applied without first adapting it to the post-Soviet world.

Although it appears that the degradation and marginalization theme would most aptly apply because the focus is on peoples' livelihoods and on the condition of the land, the current situation in Russia appears to be the opposite of the thesis. The degradation and marginalization thesis argues, "Environmentally innocuous local production systems undergo transition to overexploitation of natural resources on which they depend as a response to state development intervention and/or increasing integration in regional and global markets" (Robbins, 2004: 14, 131). This thesis is applicable to the collectivization of Soviet agriculture, an earlier stage in Russian agriculture, but does not account for the poverty rural Russians now face after the collapse of the communist system. Rural Russians are now living in poverty in part because of the current lack state intervention, and have been unable to integrate into larger markets. Thus, the current situation in the Russian countryside provides a challenge to one of the main themes of political ecology and begs the question, what happens when heavy state intervention and a larger economic market disappear? The intense state intervention during the Soviet Union, with the main focus on productivity rather than environmental concerns, has had lasting impacts on the



Russian countryside. The environmental degradation and marginalization that occurred during Soviet times has made it difficult for agricultural producers to join the global capitalist system today.

Russian agriculture is not in its current condition because the state is intervening excessively, but instead because many of the reforms, initiatives and economic benefits offered by the government have not been able to reach rural areas. The overall system is not as productive as it was with the tremendous state intervention. The state support that the rural areas received during the Soviet Union disappeared after its collapse and the new government has been unable to replace the services. Therefore, the Russian countryside is facing a crisis because the state is no longer intervening. A larger part of the agricultural sector has not been able to enter the global economic market, but people have still been marginalized and land has still been degraded. Therefore, the Russian agrarian situation shows that degradation and marginalization can be caused by other factors than state intervention or incorporation into larger economic markets. The situation sheds light on what happens with state intervention and being part of a larger market unexpectedly stops and local people are expected to fend for themselves.

### **The Importance of Place**

As geographers say, place matters, so thinking critically about location provides important insights into current agricultural practices and production. Aspects of location that are important to consider include the natural environment, transportation infrastructure, and proximity to urban centers, as well as the diffusion of power and capital. When taking into account these different aspects, one can see that agricultural success in a location is affected by a variety of factors.

Although much of the current writing about Russian agriculture has not come from geographers, other scholars use spatial analysis in their work. Stephen Wegren comments on the spatial patterns of the new private farmers in his book Agriculture and the State in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia. He argues that because of the lack of a highly developed transportation infrastructure, private farms need to be located near a larger urban area to decrease their transportation costs and thus have higher profits. An advantageous farm location was not always possible to get, because larger collective enterprises were able to use some of their previous power and prevent the disbandment of the *kolkhozes*, especially those located near urban centers. Therefore, land in advantageous locations was unavailable for private farmers (Wegren, 1998).

Wegren's analysis is important, but in Russia relatively short distances can be insurmountable because of the lack of a developed transportation infrastructure and the inability to transport goods from rural to urban places. People in some areas of rural Russia often lack the means to make the journey from rural to urban areas because of transportation difficulties, high costs and the lack of cars, trucks or other modes of transportation. Thus, they are isolated in their villages and practice subsistence agriculture, rather than being able to start successful private farms and join the larger capitalist system.

### The Natural Environment

Analyzing a specific physical location in Russia is important because it is such a large country and the environment and climatic conditions vary greatly. The varying climates and environments play a role in the viability of agriculture in different locations. Russia stretches across an area of 17,075,200 square kilometers and in 2005 only 7.1

percent of Russia's land was considered arable. Permanent cropland accounted for a mere 0.1 percent (Central Intelligence Agency, 2007). Even when the land is considered arable, an important criterion when discussing agricultural productivity, the land faces other challenges, such as excess or inadequate rainfall, saline soil, terrain that is not suited for growing crops and a restricted growing season (Mudahar, 1998). Many of these problems were inherited from past Soviet agricultural practices.

Because Russia encompasses such a large territory, various climatic regions and soil types exist, some of which present great challenges for successful agricultural output. A farm located in the *chernozem* (black earth) region of European Russia with fertile soil and a climate that favors agricultural productivity will have a greater chance of economic success than a farm located in a region with less productive soil and a harsher climate. Although the *chernozem* region does support intensive agriculture, only two million hectares of it receive enough rainfall and have proper growing conditions for crops (Mudahar, 1998). The two million hectares in European Russia are more successful than areas of land in Siberia that must overcome poorer soil quality, a subarctic climate and permafrost. Permafrost presents a tremendous challenge for agricultural productivity in six million hectares of Siberia, because it greatly affects the fragile ecosystems and makes development difficult (Scherbakova and Monroe, 1995). Agricultural productivity is concentrated in the *chernozem* lands with the best climatic conditions for agriculture. The southern regions across Russia also support more agriculture than the northern areas because of climatic conditions. Finally a large amount of unused agricultural land stretches throughout the middle latitudes of Russia. A possible reason that this land is

unused is because of the lack of a highly developed transportation infrastructure and the difficulty of bringing goods to consumers.

*Distance, Connections, and Transportation*

The environmental conditions of a location are not the sole factor determining agricultural success. A location's proximity to, as well as political and economic connections with other locations also play a role in its agricultural productivity. The connections and distances among places are both physical and constructed, and both need to be taken into account.

Transportation infrastructure is a useful way of examining the physical connections and distances between places. Russia currently does not have an adequate countrywide transportation system. Although individual cities have elaborate systems of roads, busses, trams, trolleys and in some cases subway systems, roads and other types of transportation from rural to urban areas are not properly maintained or are entirely lacking.

**Figure 2.1 The Road from Moscow to Vladivostok in the Republic of Buryatia**  
(Source: Elizabeth Engebretson)

Only one  
highway  
connects  
Moscow  
to



Vladivostok and stretches of it are in disrepair. The Trans-Siberian railroad is another form of transportation that stretches across the country, but it is slow and not the most pleasant trip. In some areas of Siberia permafrost prevents the building of paved roads because when it thaws the roads buckle (Scherbakova and Monroe, 1995).

The current poorly developed highway system in Russia was inherited from the Soviet Union. Starting in 1980 many rural citizens started to move into urban areas because of the lack of development in the countryside, so the Soviet government decided to implement a rural development plan. Part of this plan consisted of providing every rural village with “easy year-round access to district centers” (Friedgut, 2004: 153). This plan was extremely ambitious because at that time the Soviet Union did not have a major network of roads in place, so many new ones needed to be built. In fact in the 1980s, Pennsylvania had more paved roads than the entire Soviet Union (Friedgut, 2004). In the end, the road system was not developed because of the tremendous cost, and so today isolated villages across Russia still do not have access to larger centers. In 2001, the Deputy Minister of Transport reported that 36,000 rural villages did not have a connection to the larger highway system (Friedgut, 2004).

The lack of highways and transportation infrastructure greatly affect the ability of people to make a living from small private farms. In order to have an economically viable private farm, one has to have access to markets, which are often located in urban areas. If there is not a transportation system that allows one to get goods to the market, one cannot make a profit. The lack of a developed highway system also makes it harder for rural areas to obtain necessary inputs to improve farming operations. Without an extensive transportation system, isolated rural areas will have a difficult time starting private farms

and fulfilling the goal of the Russian state and international development organizations of joining the global economy.

Because Russia is so large, the greater the distance a rural area is from Moscow or smaller local urban centers, the more likely it is that the location will not be as affected by new Kremlin legislation or economic benefits. This lack of connection, because of both the physical and political distance, can be seen as both a positive and a negative. Because of the greater political distance, local people living in isolated areas have a greater degree of autonomy in their actions. They do not have to comply with decisions made in Moscow and central officials may not even notice local actions in remote places. At the same time, their isolation prevents them from receiving benefits from the center, such as economic incentives and capital. Thus rural areas are often poorer and in some cases do not have the resources to take advantage of their position of autonomy. Even in places where the physical distance is relatively small, the political distance may be great because the Kremlin may not put time or energy into the rural places because their lack of political power. The lack of a transportation infrastructure may also make the relatively small distance insurmountable.

The political distance between rural areas and Moscow is seen in the new agricultural legislation and in the implementation of that legislation. The political distance between the center and periphery in Russia impacts both the initial plan of the reforms as well as the enactment of the legislation at the village level. Agrarian reform is a process in which political power matters greatly, and rural places lack political power and thus lack a voice in the reform process (Khazanov, 2004). Because of the political distance, officials in Moscow are out of touch with the situation in the countryside;

therefore the reforms are not always appropriate for rural areas. Villagers are looking for social support and want to be successful, but do not always benefit from the reforms that were devised without their input. Reforms and initiatives instigated from the village level may have more chance of success, because local people know what they need and would be more likely to follow through with their own initiatives (Wegren, 1998).

The political distance prevents rural areas, especially marginalized ones, from receiving the physical support, such as inputs and financial capital, of the legislation. Moscow prioritizes agriculturally successful areas over areas with marginal productivity. Therefore, profitable regions are more likely to receive physical support. Also since the *chernozem* region is located closer to Moscow than Siberia, it is easier and cheaper to transport goods to and from the *chernozem* lands to Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Therefore, marginalized areas in Siberia sometimes do not receive the promised state support. Because nothing is implemented at the local level, people are unable to start private farms, so people turn to subsistence agriculture for survival.

### **The Major Actors**

Raymond L. Bryant and Sinead Bailey in their book Third World Political Ecology discuss the major actors in situations of environmental degradation, marginalization and local activism in the third world, such as the state, international development organizations, businesses and grassroots actors. Although their discussion is focused on the third world, elements can be applied to the Russian scenario, since various areas have developed or de-modernized over time. The state and international development organizations are important actors in the Russian agrarian situation, but elements need to be changed to explain situations in the post-Soviet world. The point of

examining the various actors is to recognize the power that they have, how they choose to use it, as well as the effect of the power on local populations. Without examining the power structures one cannot completely understand the current agricultural situation in Russia.

### *The State*

The first actor to be analyzed in the section is the state. In third world political ecology, the state is defined by its dual role as a developer and as a protector. The state has to balance new development opportunities and influx of money with the preservation and protection of the environment. Often in the third world the role of developer is given priority, and thus environments are being degraded. Third world states do not always have the resources of first world states or the strength and legitimacy, and therefore international and national nongovernmental organizations and multilateral institutions are able to play a greater role in guiding the country. In some instances the government is merely a figurehead and in other instances, foreign actors control the actions and influence decisions of the state (Bryant and Bailey, 1997). The weak state and power dynamics within it are important when applying political ecology to the third world; but the concept needs to be altered when applying political ecology to Russia.

The Russian state is a major actor in the agricultural sector. Notions of the third world state cannot simply be applied to it. First, Russia has a long history as a powerful state. Ivan the Terrible was crowned the first tsar of Russia in 1547, and although the Russian state has evolved over time, including the Soviet era, it has remained powerful. Many of the weak states in the third world are relatively new, since they recently gained independence after colonialism and are thus trying to find legitimacy, power and



sovereignty. After the collapse of the Soviet Union some scholars wondered what the fate of Russia would be, but over fifteen years later the Russian Federation has remained intact and is taking steps to further consolidate power (Alexseev, 2001).

Secondly, threats to Russia's sovereignty are not from foreign nongovernmental organizations or international development organizations, but rather from internal actors, such as separatist groups and regions. The Russian state at times has been suspicious of actions of foreign groups, but has taken action to curb their power and lessen their influence. A law signed by President Putin in the beginning 2006 limits the actions of foreign nongovernmental organizations and gives the Russian government greater control over their activities. President Putin "called it necessary to prevent foreigners from interfering in the political process" (Finn, 2006: 9). This law shows that the Russian state wants to maintain its sovereignty and is willing and able to take steps to do so. The ability of the Russian state to not rely on foreign organizations for money and support shows that the state itself has more resources than most third world states, and thus is in a different position when attempting to reform the agricultural sector.

Threats to Russia's sovereignty do exist to some degree and are caused by internal actors. Among the internal actors who pose a threat to the Russian state are ethnic groups who would like more autonomy or independence. Groups such as the Chechens and Tartars pose threats to Russia's territorial sovereignty, but thus far the Russian state has been able to maintain control over them and keep its authority. Some scholars argue that if Russia's economic situation does not improve, other ethnic groups living in Russia's territory may also try to gain independence. One possible idea is that the Buryat people in Eastern Siberia may choose to secede (Ericson, 1992). Considering that the Republic of

Buryatia is one of the poorest regions of Russia and does not have a great deal of political or economic power, it seems unlikely that it will have the resources to secede anytime soon.

The Russian state is aware of the threat of ethnic minorities and has thus far been able to withstand any possible problems. The state's success has come in part from violent actions, but also in part because of the nature of the relations between the core and periphery. The Yeltsin administration used a policy of "selective accommodation and coercion" to maintain central power across Russia. Different ethnic groups received more political power by becoming ethnic republics, but also received benefits from being part of the Russian Federation, and therefore did not always want to undermine the authority of Moscow (Alexseev, 1991). As discussed earlier, the degree to which the republics received benefits varied because of physical and political distance, but still they have chosen to remain part of the Russian Federation.

The Russian state has initiated the agricultural reforms since 1991; understanding the state and how it differs from other third world states is important when using the political ecology framework. A state whose power is not compromised by foreign actors and has control over internal actors will handle agricultural reform differently than weak states. The Russian government is acting on its own accord and is not trying to please international development organizations with its agricultural legislation. Because the reforms have been initiated by the state rather than by local people, they are not always effective or what the local people want. This disconnect exists, because the state is in a position where it does not necessarily have to take into account local ideas or wishes

(Wegren, 1998). The Russian state is a firmly established actor that holds a great deal of power in the fate of the agricultural sector.

Although the Russian state is firmly established and does hold power, it is still unable to fully accomplish its goals in the agricultural sector. Decrees and initiatives to reform the sector have started in Moscow, but have not reached rural areas across the country quickly, so little has changed. Instead of looking to other sources for help, such as international development organizations, the Russian state has continued on its ineffective path since it believes that it is powerful and does not need help from outside sources. Therefore, the powerful Russian state is in reality unable to implement successful agrarian reform.

#### *International Development Organizations*

International development organizations are another important actor to consider, although their relationship with Russia is different than with the third world. These organizations include bodies such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Their power has grown tremendously since the mid twentieth century, and now they often have a great deal of importance and power in various countries, especially those in the third world. In proposing or implementing projects they can both support or undermine the state's authority, depending on the goals of each actor (Bryant and Bailey, 1997). The World Bank and United Nations have conducted many studies and offered numerous proposals about how to improve the agricultural situation. The World Bank is currently operating agricultural programs in Russia, has abandoned some and has already completed others. Although its presence in Russia is not as great as in other countries, the World Bank is still an actor. Thus

understanding the position of international development organizations and specifically how it relates to Russia and the agricultural sector is important.

The idea of international development organizations originated in the first world. Therefore they often enter situations with a first world agenda, which often causes them to not critically evaluate the situation outside of their Western biases. With regards to Russian agriculture, the state and the various international development organizations share the same goal of having Russia enter the world economic system and be able to produce enough food for the country (Bonanno, 1998). The concept of the small private farms thriving in a capitalist system has worked in Western countries. Therefore, small private farming became the dominant paradigm when discussing agricultural development and change in other countries. Because the ultimate goal of the international development organizations and the Russian state is the same, the organizations are not undermining the Russian state's authority.

### **The Importance of Fieldwork**

In addition to secondary sources, this paper draws upon fieldwork completed in a village in the Republic of Buryatia. Fieldwork has traditionally been used as a research method in political ecology and is crucial in determining what is happening at a small scale in relation to larger political and economic structures (Zimmerer and Bassett, 2003).

The fieldwork for this research was conducted in the Republic of Buryatia because of connections with a village, through the School for International Training Russian study abroad program. Also, the village was once a *kolkhoz*, making it an ideal place to study the agricultural transition. The fieldwork took place in November 2005, when I spent about three weeks living in the village of Desyatnikovo. Living with a

female pensioner, who had worked in the finance department of the local *kolkhoz*, allowed me to be fully immersed in the community, which facilitated my observations. Because I am an American woman, I did have a Western bias during my fieldwork, but my relationship with my host provided me with a gateway into to the community and allowed me to participate in a variety of daily village tasks.

Because of the connection with the community I was able to conduct five semi-structured interviews, as well as have numerous informal conversations with my host mother. All of my informants were over the age of sixty-five, were former *kolkhozniks* and had retired before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Their positions on the *kolkhoz* included bookkeepers, a vegetable worker, a Lenin Award winning pig farmer and a Lenin Award winning tractor driver (Interviews 11/05). From hearing their stories I was able to better understand what life was like on the *kolkhoz* and how the agricultural transition during the 1990s affected an older generation.

## Chapter Three: Siberia and the Republic of Buryatia

### Background on Siberia

Because of Russia's vast size, agricultural practices and production vary across and within different regions. Siberia is a prime example of a region with much internal variation.<sup>1</sup> Siberia's harsh climate makes agricultural productivity more difficult than in the more fertile regions of European Russia. Much of the region is covered in permafrost, which as discussed earlier, makes development extremely difficult because of the fragile ecosystem, as well as the ground buckling during the warmer months (Scherbakova and Monroe, 1995). The northern areas face arctic conditions, which make agriculture almost impossible, but some ethnic groups have been able to overcome the challenge. The Sakha people in Sakha (formerly Yakutia) Republic have been successfully able to raise cattle, but not all peoples are so fortunate (Crate, 2002).

Climate is not the sole factor impeding agricultural success in much of Siberia. Distance, both physical and political, greatly affects agriculture in the region as well as Siberia's relations with the central government in Moscow. The physical distance between Moscow and Siberia is not easily overcome because of the lack of transportation infrastructure. Political distance and the relationship with the Kremlin are interconnected. Much of Siberia is comprised of non-Russian ethnic groups, including the Buryats, Sakha

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions of what area actually constitutes Siberia vary because it is not an official political area but rather a perceived region. For some Siberia is all land to the east of the Ural Mountains stretching to the Pacific Ocean, but others do not include the territory bordering the Pacific Ocean. Instead that territory is sometimes considered part of the Russian Far East. In addition Siberia is often broken down into Western and Eastern Siberia, which makes the discussion of place easier because the region of Siberia in itself encompasses a vast territory. A Siberian Federal District, which includes twelve smaller political units, also exists, but its territory does not encompass all of the territory included in many of the popular definitions of Siberia.

and many others. The Buryats and Sakha have their own ethnic republics and thus more freedom from the central government in Moscow, but the extra freedom sometimes prevents the republics from receiving support from the center (Balzer, 1999).

Siberia's relationship to the state is deeply affected by its diverse ethnic groups. Because many non-Russian groups have or want political power, the Kremlin is forced to interact with these actors differently than in ethnically Russian areas. In the 1990s, President Yeltsin handled the situation of various ethnic groups quite differently from one another. While Chechens were demonized for wanting independence and the Tartars were threatened with war, Yeltsin reached out to ethnic minorities in Siberia in an attempt to decrease the political distance. Yeltsin signed agreements with ethnic republics that promised financial support, including federal investment (Alexseev, 1999). The situations were handled differently because Yeltsin wanted to prevent the ethnic republics in Siberia from following the examples of Chechnya and Tartarstan.

The history of Siberia also affects its relationship with the Russian state today. Siberia was conquered by Russian forces in only sixty years, starting in the late sixteenth century. After a battle was won over the Tartars, the Siberian window was opened and the Cossacks soon defeated local peoples across the region, reaching the Pacific by the mid seventeenth century (Lincoln, 1994). Because Siberia was incorporated into the Russian Empire much later than European Russia, many Russians perceived the great landmass as a wild and uncivilized place. Even today some Russians still view Siberia as backwards and undeveloped (Interviews 11/05).

Negative perceptions about the region were furthered because it served as a place for exile, forced labor, and a refuge for people who wanted an escape from the urban

centers of Russia. One group exiled to Siberia starting in the seventeenth century was the Old Believers, a schismatic Orthodox sect. The Old Believers did not accept the new reforms passed in the Russian Orthodox Church. They wanted to maintain their old traditions instead of following the ideas introduced by Nikon, the patriarch of the Russian church, who wanted to make Russian Orthodoxy more similar to Greek Orthodoxy (Robson, 1995). Although many were exiled to Siberia, not all Old Believers who went to Siberia were forced to live there. Rather, many chose to reside in Siberia because it was less populated. Therefore the Old Believers could easily create more pious communities (Robson, 1995). The Russian government also needed people to grow grain in southwestern Siberia, so the new settlements in the region would not be dependent on European Russia for grain. This provided another reason to send exiles and marginalized populations to the area (Metzo, 2003). A great political distance exists between the regions of Siberia and Moscow persists until today.

### **The Republic of Buryatia**

Although similarities within Siberia do exist, it is difficult to generalize about the entire region because of its size and diversity. Therefore, the Republic of Buryatia will be used as a case study to better understand how agriculture has changed in one location in southeastern Siberia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Buryatia's southern location allows for successful agricultural practices, so it is a valid place to study the current transition. Because it is an ethnic republic with a diverse population, generalizing agricultural findings from Buryatia to areas across Russia can be problematic. Thus, it is important to remember that Buryatia is a unique place with a unique history and a unique population.



The Republic of Buryatia is located in southern Siberia, east of Lake Baikal and to the north of Mongolia. The total area of the republic is 351,300 square kilometers and the terrain varies between mountainous areas, coniferous forests and steppes (Government of Buryatia, 2004). The western side of Buryatia borders about sixty percent of Lake Baikal's total coast (Government of Buryatia, 2004). The climate does present challenges for agricultural production in the republic. Because of its continental position, the summers are short and hot and the winters long and cold. Also, frosts often occur late into the spring.

Because of Buryatia's climate and location it is difficult to provide the population with a regular nutritious diet. Buryatia's population has never reached the levels of nutrition mandated by the Nutrition Institute at the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the current situation is only getting worse. People living in Buryatia need to consume more nutrition because of the extreme climatic conditions. These conditions make eating a healthy diet much more difficult, because of the challenges associated with food production. The Institute determined that residents of Buryatia need to consume thirty five percent more nutrition than people living in the central part of the country (Kolesnyak, 2003). Because people need more nutrition and are thus far struggling, agriculture in the region is extremely important. Nutritious food needs to be produced for rural areas, but it also needs to be transported to urban areas so city residents have access to a proper diet as well. One way villagers have been able to eat more nutrition is by practicing subsistence agriculture.

Buryatia's largest urban area and capital is Ulan-Ude. The majority of the population lives in urban areas, and Ulan-Ude's population is 359,391 people

(Government of Russia, 2004). The transportation infrastructure in rural areas is lacking, but Ulan-Ude is somewhat connected to Russia's larger urban centers. The local airport has flights to Moscow and other Russian cities, and the Trans-Siberian Railroad also stops in Ulan-Ude. By train Ulan-Ude is located 5,519 kilometers from Moscow and 3,500 kilometers from the Pacific Ocean (Government of Buryatia, 2004).

Development of a transportation infrastructure in the rural and especially mountainous areas is hindered by permafrost. An extensive highway system within the country does not exist, although the republic government claims it does (Government of Buryatia, 2004). The total highway system in Buryatia as of 2006 consisted of 14,097 kilometers of roads of which 6,297 kilometers were designated as general use (Ministry of Economic Development of Buryatia, 2006). The Buryat government claims that the highway system is able to deliver goods to any part of Russia, and to reach China and Mongolia (Government of Buryatia, 2004). The republic government recognizes the need for improving the transportation system and in 2005 implemented a plan for constructing new and repairing old roads. The government hopes that by 2008 three hundred kilometers of roads will be either constructed or repaired (Government of Buryatia, 2004). In addition to the highway system, 1,140 kilometers of railroad stretch across the republic, and one of the main items transferred by rail is foodstuffs (Government of Buryatia, 2004).

In 2002, the total population of the republic was 981,238 people (Government of Russia, 2004). Although the republic is an ethnic republic, Buryats, an ethnic group closely related to the Mongols, are not the majority and have not been the majority of the population since the republic was created during Soviet times (Balzer, 1999). The

population has decreased since 1989 when the population was 1,038,252 people according to the Soviet Census. The 2002 All Russian Census reported that Buryats accounted for 272,910 people while Russians made up 665,512 people; Buryats still do not have a majority (Government of Russia, 2004). Other groups that live in Buryatia include Ukrainians, other people from former Soviet republics and Old Believers.

Russians constitute a majority of the population of Buryatia because Soviet politicians constructed the republic in 1937 and encouraged Russian transmigration. At first three different political units were created to divide the power structure of the region. These units were the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Republic and the Agin and Ust-Orda Buryat Autonomous Okrugs. In 1958, the three areas combined to form the Buryat ASSR, and the Mongol part of the title was dropped in order to weaken connections with Mongolia (Balzer, 1999). The Russian majority may also be a reason why Buryatia has not as actively tried to gain independence, as have other ethnic republics, such as Chechnya.

The Buryats have not been as vocal as other ethnic groups about gaining their independence from the Russian Federation. A resurgence of traditional cultural practices, Buddhism and the Buryat language has occurred since 1991, but this resurgence has not been strong enough for Buryatia to actively fight for independence. In 1990 Buryatia officially declared its sovereignty within Russia and was the third ethnic republic to do so. The declaration stated that the rights of the people of Buryatia were to be valued above Soviet or Russian laws that would violate their interests. The declaration also stated that Buryatia was multinational and equal to the other union republics (Balzer, 1999).

Although thus far Buryatia appears to be satisfied with its position in the Russian Federation, the potential for an independence movement is present. Buryat people are closely related to the Mongols, and because the republic shares a border with Mongolia and there is a history of pan-Mongolic activism in the area. Therefore, it seems that an independence movement would possibly be able to receive support from Mongolia (Balzer, 1999). Mongolia is an extremely poor country, so if Buryatia were to become independent it does appear doubtful that Mongolia could offer much, if any, financial support. Activists in Buryatia are aware of Mongolia's economic situation and are thus not strongly pushing for independence at this time (Alexseev, 1999).

Instead of fighting for independence from the Russian Federation in the 1990s, Buryatia attempted to forge a stronger relationship with the central Russian government and decrease the political distance between them. In 1995 the Buryat government signed a bilateral agreement with Moscow that gave Buryatia "...special treatment as a depressed economic region in need of credits for growth stimulation, socioeconomic aid for the Baikal-Amur rail line and guarantees of support for the Lake Baikal region ecology programs" (Balzer, 1999: 145). Three years later the Buryat government still had not received the promised support from the Kremlin and was starting to lose hope about receiving any assistance at all. Buryatia has found itself in a difficult situation because it has been unable to receive help from either its own country's government or from nearby countries with cultural similarities. Therefore, Buryatia has had to learn to survive on its own. One way the republic government has worked towards survival is by implementing plans to improve agriculture in the republic.

*The Economy and Agriculture in Buryatia*

Buryatia is one of Russia's poorest regions (Kolesnyak, 2003). Ninety three percent of the population lives below the poverty line, in part because Buryatia has been unable to use its natural resources to the best of its ability because of its remote location (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, 2002). The level of poverty decreased by 13.6 percent in the republic from 2004 to 2005, but the Republic of Buryatia is still the third poorest region in the Siberian Federal District (Government of Buryatia, 2006). Out of the twelve regions in the district, Buryatia had the highest cost of minimal foodstuffs in December 2005, with a cost of 1481 rubles, which is about fifty seven dollars (Government of Buryatia, 2006). One reason for the higher cost of food in Buryatia is because of high transportation costs, since the transportation infrastructure is not extensively developed in the republic or in Russia.

Economic development in the region has been hampered by its remote location, but the local government is attempting to use the location to its advantage. Because the republic is located relatively close to the Pacific coast, the Buryat government is marketing itself as the "transport gate to the Asian Pacific region" (Government of Buryatia, 2004). If this tactic is successful, Buryatia's transportation infrastructure could improve and more money could enter the republic.

In Buryatia, agriculture is concentrated in the central and southern regions, because of climatic conditions and varying landscapes. About 5.4% of the total land area is used for agriculture. As of 2006, 249 collective farming operations functioned in Buryatia, as did eighteen food processing plants and thousands of private plots and other smaller farming operations (Ministry of Economic Development of Buryatia, 2006). The

main crops grown in the republic are spring wheat, oats, barley, potatoes and various types of vegetables. The Buryat people have a long tradition of animal husbandry and stock breeding as well, so raising cattle for meat and dairy products, sheep breeding, pig breeding and poultry farms are all common in the republic. Grain and egg production is concentrated in the larger farming enterprises, while private plots and smaller operations account for the majority of potatoes, vegetables, meat and milk (Government of Buryatia, 2004).

In addition to Buryats and Russians, other minority groups also live in rural Buryatia and practice agriculture. In scholarly work about Russian agriculture, these minority groups are often overlooked. In order to more completely understand the agricultural situation in Buryatia, the agrarian practices of other minority groups also need to be considered. One such minority group to consider is the Old Believers because they have lived in the present day Republic of Buryatia for hundreds of years and have added to the agricultural and cultural development of the region.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, agricultural output in Buryatia has declined. The overall production of animal foodstuffs has fallen drastically from 1991 to 2001. Production on private plots and animal husbandry at the subsistence level has increased, but not enough to compensate for the overall decline. One reason for the decline is the increasing cost of inputs, such as animal feed (Kolesnyak, 2003). From 2004 to 2005 the number of cattle also declined, so maintaining successful animal husbandry in the region is still difficult (Ministry of Economic Development of Buryatia, 2006).

The Buryat government recognizes the importance of agriculture in the region, and is attempting to improve the situation, although to limited degrees of success. The republic government hopes that agricultural production is going to increase by six to twelve percent by 2008, and recognizes that most of the production comes from household or private farms rather than the collective enterprises (Ministry of Economic Development of Buryatia, 2006). The government is planning to expand rural credit cooperative societies, so more people will be able to receive needed financial support. In addition to added financial support, the government hopes to improve the technology in the agricultural sector by increasing the number of machines and raising the productive qualities of various animals (Government of Buryatia, 2004). An economist for the Buryat government also recommends returning to traditional Buryat animal husbandry practices as well as improving technology in the agricultural sector (Kolesnyak, 2003). Because the reforms are still being implemented and the end date for the project is in 2008, the results of the new plan are still unknown at this time.

Although the Buryat government is currently enacting reforms and claiming to support the agricultural sector, support actually decreased during the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 1995, 8.2 percent of the republic's budget went towards the agricultural sector, but by 2002 it had decreased to 3.2 percent (Kolesnyak, 2003). Since 2002 the government has started to enact more programs and reforms, so it appears that the lack of support during the 1990s is coming to an end. Hopefully by improving technology, providing more financial support and incorporating successful local strategies, agriculture in the Republic of Buryatia will improve and people will be able to more easily receive proper nutrition.

## A Buryat Village Case Study

Understanding agriculture at the republic level is helpful, but examining the situation at a village level provides more detail. The village of Tory is located in a western part of the Republic of Buryatia. The village of 1,177 residents is located near several rivers at the lower end of a valley. Because of its geographic location it has some of the best soils in the region (Metzo, 2003). Tory is a predominantly Buryat village, about seventy percent of the population, and has a variety of amenities, including numerous shops, a café, clinic and a three-story brick school (Metzo, 2003). Households in the village are often organized with a main house, a variety of outbuildings and sheds, a Russian bathhouse known as a *banya*, and a private plot or plots depending on the wealth of the family and animal pens if they raise livestock (Metzo, 2003). Plots are not always located next to the owner's house, which can make transportation to and from the plots more difficult. The plots located farther from the village center are often larger, but require the time and the ability to travel to them.

Tory, like villages all across the Soviet Union, was collectivized in the 1930s and organized into a *kolkhoz*, where the vast majority of the village population worked. Although government reforms started in 1991 with the Yeltsin administration, the *kolkhoz* did not stop operations nor was reorganized at that time. The workers on the *kolkhoz* decided to keep their status as a *kolkhoz* around 1992, but in 1995 the *kolkhoz* ceased operations and its current legal status is unclear (Metzo, 2003). The ambiguous legal status of the farming operation in 2003 shows that the government in Moscow does not have much control over local agriculture in Buryatia.



Although lack of control could be a positive attribute, it also has a negative side. Because the government does not have much power over the agricultural sector, positive reforms and support from the Kremlin are also not reaching Buryatia. In Tory, four households, out of Metzo's sample, identified themselves as having commercial farming operations rather than just practicing subsistence agriculture. Of these four none said that they received any "financial or in-kind support from the government" (Metzo, 2003: 113).

Lack of government assistance is not the only obstacle villagers face when attempting to start private farms. In order to run a successful private farm one needs to have access to machinery, such as tractors and combines. Residents of Tory who want machinery and technology do not have the means to afford it. While people are unable to afford machinery, some of the old *kolkhoz* machinery is simply rusting away in fields in disrepair. Also, this equipment is not always appropriate for the scale of agriculture. When people who simply farmed their small plots in Tory were asked why they did not have a larger scale farm, they cited the lack of machinery as one of the reasons (Metzo, 2003). It is inefficient and almost impossible to cultivate one hundred hectares of land by hand, so machinery is of the utmost importance. In order to be successful and competitive, villagers need to have farm machinery available to them.

Lack of machinery is not the only factor preventing villagers from operating successful private commercial farms in Tory. Because the position of the *kolkhoz* is still undefined, receiving one's share of land from it can be difficult (Metzo, 2003). When Zhargal, a Tory resident, talked about starting his farm, he said that "he exchanged blows with everyone" over receiving his share of the land (Metzo, 2003: 108). One reason

receiving his share of land was so difficult may stem from his low position within the old *kolkhoz* (Metzo, 2003). If villagers do not have access to the land, they do not have a chance to operate a farm at a larger scale. Even when faced with the obstacles of lack of support, machinery and land, people have still found ways to start successful private farms. This shows that people have a desire to work in the agricultural sector and are willing to find innovative ways to farm.

One reason that some private farms have been able to survive is that the farmers also run other businesses on the side to supplement their agricultural income. Zhargal has been able to run a farm, but in addition he “has a small shop, collects and resells tractor parts, and negotiates timber sales with potential buyers” (Metzo, 2003: 108). Without the additional income from his side operations, Zhargal would not be able to operate his private farming operation. Zhargal’s story reaffirms that simply surviving from a private farm is almost impossible. People are either forced into subsistence agriculture or run many small businesses simultaneously in order to make a profit.

Raising livestock on a small farm poses even more challenges, even though a strong tradition of animal husbandry exists in Buryatia. Villagers can often afford to raise a small number of animals, but increasing the herd size to be competitive on a larger market is much harder. The extra costs for feed and inputs as well as the additional time involved often make the larger endeavor unprofitable. Also keeping an animal alive during the cold Siberian winter is quite challenging. To keep a milking cow and a calf alive for a winter in Buryatia requires two or more hectares of land, yielding two tons of hay (Metzo, 2003). Many residents do not have access to the amount of land needed for the extra feed and lack the money to buy it elsewhere.

People and families who are not part of a collective organization or do not have a private farm practice subsistence agriculture. The land they use is generally the same land that was given to them during the Soviet period as their private plot. Now, for some residents, their private plots are their sole sources of income, so people are dependent of them for survival. In Tory, more people harvest their private plots than participate in other forms of agriculture (Metzo, 2003).

Some families are able to produce extra food from their plots and are able to sell it for a limited amount of additional income. It is not uncommon to see women and children selling food along the road or outside of local buildings to motorists and other people passing through the village. Villagers in Tory have a larger customer base for selling food along the road because the village is located near a national park; more people pass through Tory than in other more remote villages (Metzo, 2003). The extra food is generally sold along the roadside in the village instead of in larger urban areas because high transportation costs can make the trip to the city unprofitable. Some villagers are willing to take their extra goods to Sludianka, the closest urban area to Tory, because in Sludianka they are able to find other household and necessary items for cheaper prices than in Tory, as well as sell some of their goods (Metzo, 2003).

After examining the agricultural situation at a village scale, it appears that the current Buryat government programs are in line with the needs and goals of the local people. Therefore, if the reforms are successfully implemented at the village level, the agricultural output may increase. As discussed earlier, agriculture in Buryatia is extremely important because people in the area need more nutrition and producing more food in the region will allow easier access to more nutritional food. An increase in

agricultural productivity could also help improve the currently dismal economic situation of the entire republic. The government must ensure its plans are enacted, because the lack of and decreasing support during the 1990s from Ulan-Ude and Moscow show that programs may not reach the rural places where they are needed. The greatest plans and ideas mean nothing if they are unable to reach local people living in the countryside. If plans are not implemented, or until their implementation, people in rural parts of Buryatia will continue to practice subsistence agriculture in order to survive.

## Chapter Four: Agriculture in Desyatnikovo

The village for the case study of agriculture in the Republic of Buryatia is Desyatnikovo. Desyatnikovo is an historic Old Believer, or *Semeyskiye* as they are known in the region, village. The total population of Desyatnikovo is about 1,300 people according to a local resident, but the population appeared smaller (Interviews 11/05). The village is located about sixty kilometers from Ulan-Ude and about fifteen kilometers from Tarbagatai, the regional capital. It is part of the Tarbagataisky region, which is a main grain producing region of Buryatia (Ministry of Economic Development of Buryatia, 2006). The village is located along a major road that stretches from Moscow to Vladivostok, which is the only paved road in the village. Although the distances to larger urban areas, such as Ulan-Ude and Tarbagatai are relatively short, transportation is not readily accessible.

Residents of the village stressed that they provided for themselves and had successful private plots. The fact that people produced almost everything themselves was one of the first things they would share during conversations and something that they valued (Interviews 11/05). This shows a certain amount of pride is taken in being able to support oneself by subsistence agriculture, at least among the elderly population. One aspect of Old Believer culture that is important to agriculture is their work ethic; they believe in hard work and getting things done themselves and this ethic is evident in their agricultural practices.

The village is located in a valley, with sloping hills on either side, and the town stretches along the main road. There are a few other streets parallel to the main road to the South. After the row of houses to the north there is a hill, which is covered in large fields and provides a place for cattle to graze and some larger

**Figure 4.1 View of Desvatnikovo (Source: Elizabeth Engebretson)**



scale agriculture. Behind the houses to the South is a smaller hill where the remains of the old pig farm, which was part of the *kolkhoz*, are located. Behind the pig farm is a larger hill covered in forest.

Currently, the village has a variety of services for its residents, although it lacks running water and indoor plumbing. People can buy a limited selection of food, alcohol and household items at one of the three small stores located along the main road. About two hundred children attend lessons at the local school. A post office is open on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, and a hospital also offers limited services. The local club puts on cultural events and runs a discotheque for the youth on Friday and Saturday nights. The village government also has an office in the village.

Money enters the village through a variety of methods. The government pays the retired residents monthly pensions, providing them with a limited amount of cash. The

informants from my fieldwork had pensions ranging from 1300 to 4000 rubles, which is between about \$50 and \$155, depending on what their position on the *kolkhoz* had been. The republic government also pays the salaries of the teachers at the local school, the few people who work for the village administration and the employees at the cultural club.

### **Agriculture in Desyatnikovo during Soviet Times**

Desyatnikovo was collectivized in the early 1930s in the form of a *kolkhoz*. The village residents were forced to turn over all their land to the state and only received sixty *sotkas* for their own personal use, less land than most people had previously cultivated. The first years of the *kolkhoz* were difficult because the *kolkhoz* lacked machinery and specialists. With time the *kolkhoz* became more successful, and two other smaller nearby villages joined with the first village to form one large *kolkhoz*. The *kolkhoz* was quite successful according to my informants. Mikhail P. mentioned that there were other *kolkhozes* in the area, but that his was the richest.<sup>2</sup> Two other bookkeepers also recall the *kolkhoz* as being very rich (Interviews 11/05).

In 1971 the *kolkhoz* grossed a one million ruble profit, one of the richest years of the *kolkhoz*.<sup>3</sup> It was one of the most successful *kolkhozes* in the Republic of Buryatia and the entire region. During this year the *kolkhoz* had 34,392 hectares of land, but only 263 hectares were allotted to the workers' private plots. The 263 hectares provided plots for 16,652 workers, showing just how small the private plots were and how little of the land was given to the employees.

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<sup>2</sup> The informants often described their *kolkhoz* as rich or the richest, showing that they are proud of their *kolkhoz* and the work they put into it, but the use of rich is their personal opinion. Their opinions do have some validity because records from 1971 show that the *kolkhoz* was one of the most successful in the region.

<sup>3</sup> During my fieldwork, the only *kolkhoz* records available to me were from 1971. Other records were unavailable for unknown reasons.

The *kolkhoz* was more than just a large scale farming operation in 1971. Besides cultivating the land and raising animals, the *kolkhoz* also had four mills, two shops to fix machinery, three lumber facilities and a bakery. These resources were spread among the three villages that were part of the *kolkhoz*, with each village having an equal share, except Desyatnikovo, which had two mills and the only bakery. It received more of the industry because it was the center and largest part of the *kolkhoz*.

The *kolkhoz* records from 1971 show that not everyone received monetary compensation for his or her work on the *kolkhoz*. Workers who did not receive money were instead paid in food and products from the *kolkhoz* industries. The lack of money prevented people from buying goods at the store, so they were completely dependent on their private plot and what the *kolkhoz* gave them. The types of products and food people received as compensation from the *kolkhoz* included honey, some vegetables, bread, flour, grain and eggs.

Even those workers who did receive monetary compensation for their labor, such as tractor drivers, were still dependent on their private plot for food. Sergei I., a tractor driver, said that even though he received monetary compensation, he needed to buy other items in the store, such as clothing, tea and juice. Therefore he was still dependent on his plot for vegetables and potatoes, and his animals for meat and dairy products. He chose to produce what he could on his own, and only purchased items he could not grow or raise (Interviews 11/05).

The fact that people were expected to support themselves from their private plots, while at the same time working on the *kolkhoz*, presented the workers with the difficult



task of working two jobs at once.<sup>4</sup> All workers, no matter their role in the *kolkhoz*, faced this same dilemma. Sergei I. said he worked twenty six hours a day, showing that he had more work than could be finished in a day and felt that he was constantly working. His days would start at 6:00am and he would not finish working until at least 9:00pm. Elena S. also shared stories about continuously working. In the accounting office of the *kolkhoz* she did the typical eight-hour workday from 8:00am to 5:00pm with an hour for lunch, but her day started before and ended after her time at the office. She would wake up at 5:00am to milk the cows and when she returned home from work she would continue to take care of different aspects of her household, including tending to her animals and private plot as well as cooking, cleaning and raising her children (Interviews 11/05). Because of all of the extra responsibilities women often worked a triple shift.

People were forced to work long hours outside of the *kolkhoz* because their private plots and livestock required much time and effort, and people were dependent on them for survival. People would cultivate their sixty *sotkas* with as many vegetables and potatoes as could be grown on the land. Some people also had land in addition to the standard sixty *sotkas*. Liudmila M. received eighty *sotkas* from the *kolkhoz* in 1964 when

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<sup>4</sup> Various organizations and academics have presented three different interpretations of the double workload *kolkhozniks* faced. The first states that the system was one of “exploitation and subordination” where workers were similar to serfs tied to the land and forced to work. The second interpretation argues that neither the *kolkhoz* nor the private plots were able to function to their full potential because people were not able to put enough work into either enterprise, but instead had to juggle between the two. The third explanation analyzes the situation as a symbiosis of the *kolkhoz* and private plots, where both entities succeed although with the price of people constantly working (Alanen, 2001). The situation in Desyatnikovo supports the third interpretation, because the *kolkhoz* was one of the most successful in the region and people were able to produce enough food from their private plots to survive, although the workers were busy almost twenty four hours a day. This shows that both entities successfully existed at the same time and appeared to be functioning at their full or almost full potential.

she moved back to Desyatnikovo with her husband and two children. She was given eighty *sotkas* rather than sixty *sotkas* because her family had two cows. Her husband also had the prominent position as a brigade leader on the *kolkhoz*, which helped her family to receive more land. Along with the eighty *sotkas* that were located away from the village she also had twenty-four *sotkas* within the village, fourteen *sotkas* for her house and outbuildings, including a garage, *banya*, and three sheds. The other ten *sotkas* were divided between two fields: one field was three *sotkas* and one was seven *sotkas*, each located on different sides of her household area. She received the land from the *kolkhoz* and the ten *sotkas* by her house in the same year because her neighbor across the street, who had previously cultivated the fields, died, which gave her family the opportunity to use the additional land. Having plots of land in a variety of places made cultivating the land more time consuming, because people had to split their time between different plots, as well as account for travel time to and from the various plots, which could be a lengthy, especially if one did not own a car. Along with farming three fields, her family also raised two cows, some pigs and twenty chickens. From the land and their livestock she and her husband were able to produce enough food for themselves and their three children (Interviews 11/05).

The general size of the private plots during the *kolkhoz* was around 60 *sotkas* of land. Some families' land was entirely located next to their houses, while others only had land located farther away. Also, like Liudmila M, some families were able to have land by their houses and sixty *sotkas* farther away. People used their land as pasture for their livestock and to grow their staple foods, such as potatoes, cabbage, onions, carrots, tomatoes, cucumbers, and others, depending on the household (Interviews 11/05).

People fondly reminisce about their past households, especially about the livestock they previously raised, specifically from the 1960s through the early 1980s. My informants were nostalgic because during that time period they were young and raising their families. Therefore, now when they talk about life on the *kolkhoz* they remember back to the good old days. Tatiana A. when describing the cattle she previously owned said that she had all of the dairy products she ever needed. Elena S. listed the amount of livestock in her large household including “two cows, pigs, sheep and chickens.” The workers’ livestock would use part of the private plot as pasture, and people also had pens and structures for the animals to stay on their property along with the outbuildings. Sergei I. and Elena S. both responded that their livestock lived at home, drawing an important distinction between what was the property of the *kolkhoz* and what was their private property.

Although livestock did live on the owner’s property, the animals were purchased from the *kolkhoz*. The informants did not remember how much livestock from the *kolkhoz* cost, which shows that the cost did not have a huge effect on their economic situations. Although Elena S. did not remember the exact price for the livestock, she remembered it as being inexpensive (Interviews 11/05). People had to buy their livestock from the *kolkhoz* because there was no other place to purchase it, but the government made the prices affordable so people could raise their own livestock and thus provide for themselves.

The *kolkhoz* had a large amount of machinery, including fifty tractors and forty combines, plus a variety of cars and trucks. From my informants it seems that they did not use the *kolkhoz* machinery on their own plots, but instead did the work by hand or

bought their own tractor or other type of machinery. The equipment used on the *kolkhoz* was designed for large-scale agriculture, making it unsuitable for people to use on their private plots. About twenty five years ago Liudmila M. was able to buy an extremely small tractor, which her family used on their land.<sup>5</sup> Purchasing a tractor shows that her family had the means to afford machinery, possibly because they were saving money on food by practicing subsistence agriculture.

Overall people seemed happy with their agriculture and animal husbandry during the time of the *kolkhoz*. People had to work long hours, but now when asked about the work people say they liked the work, or work was simply work and needed to be done. Out of my informants, no one said they disliked the job or did not want to do it or even complained about having to work such long hours. People realized the work needed to be done, and although they might not have wanted to do it, the fact that they did it and did it well is evidence of their strong work ethic. People also needed to work hard on their private plots, since that was their major food source. Because of the hard work the *kolkhoz* in Desyatnikovo was able to be extremely successful and at the same time they were able to produce their own food and be almost completely self-sufficient.

### **The End of the *Kolkhoz* and the Agricultural Transition**

Gorbachev and *perestroika* brought few positive changes to the village according to Mikhail P. He said that before 1989 the *kolkhoz* had a great quantity of livestock, but with *perestroika* all of the livestock perished or was lost (Interviews 11/05). He may have been exaggerating, but even with the exaggeration his statement shows that he associates

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<sup>5</sup> During an interview, Liudmila M. described her tractor as extremely small. Her use of adjectives implies that it was smaller than the machinery used on the *kolkhoz*.

the end of the Soviet system with the negative event of the loss of livestock and a turn for the worse.

The *kolkhoz* in Desyatnikovo did not fully stop operations until 2000, when an auction divided up the land and resources. Currently a farming operation is trying to continue practicing collective large-scale agriculture in the area, but is struggling. It employs sixty workers and in 2004 the grain harvest was only three quintals.<sup>6</sup> This current operation has a long way to go if it wants to become close to the size of the previous *kolkhoz*, which employed over 16,000 workers and harvested over 67,000 quintals of grain in its richest year. People still trying to make larger scale agriculture a viable profession shows that the will to make a living in the agricultural sector still exists, although it is currently difficult to succeed.

According to Mikhail P, the village did not benefit from any of the reforms that the government passed during the 1990s, and farmers trying to make it on their own had a difficult time (Interviews 11/05). His account of the events shows the political distance from Moscow experienced in the village. His son started a small-scale private farm, but after two years had to close it down and is now unemployed. Mikhail P. cites the lack of a tractor and the lack of help from the state as reasons why his son was not able to make a living from his private farm. Liudmila M's son also has been unable to start a private farm because of financial constraints.

The lack of machinery is a problem that farmers are currently facing in Desyatnikovo. As in Tory, people who want machinery do not have the means to pay for it, and some of the old *kolkhoz* machinery is simply rusting away in a field. Today

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<sup>6</sup> One quintal equals one hundred kilograms.

Liudmila M.'s son is using the small old tractor purchased twenty five years ago and wants to buy a bigger one, but cannot afford it. As mentioned before, Mikhail P.'s son had to close his farm partly due to his lack of machinery.

**Figure 4.2 Old *Kolkhoz* Combines in a Field (source: Elizabeth Engebretson)**



Unemployment is just one of the problems that the closing of the *kolkhoz* brought to the village. Other problems include drinking, crime, smoking and a lack of culture in the younger generations. Mikhail P. said that unemployment is now high in the village (Interviews 11/05). Unemployment contributes to the problem of alcohol abuse, especially among the male population, which can send life into a downward spiral. Because of the size of the village, a limited number of job opportunities exist, but hardly any compared to the Soviet years. Since supporting oneself from a private farm is very difficult, people are left without work and are forced to try to survive simply from their private plots and subsistence agriculture. Since the unemployed cannot afford meat and flour, they often have to resort to stealing it from other village residents. Because of this,

other residents lock their meat and flour in outbuildings and every night they lock the large gates surrounding their households, preventing entry into their property.

Mikhail P. believes that today young people lack culture, because the discipline and work ethic that was present during the *kolkhoz* era are now absent. Today young people who live in the village just drink, smoke, and do not want to work. This statement shows that hard work is valued and that people are concerned with the direction that the village is headed. His view of youth also shows a generational difference between the older and younger residents. The younger generations do not necessarily want to work in the agricultural sector or on the personal plots, although they are often forced to help their parents. Young people, who are able to leave the village, now have more professional options; thus they often chose not to work the land, but seek employment in other sectors of the economy. Young people are leaving the village for other job opportunities, and living elsewhere in Buryatia or Russia is a common occurrence. From my observations it seems that the population in the village is predominately pensioners and people over the age of forty with families. The eighteen to thirty year old age group did not have a strong presence in the village. Liudmila M.'s two daughters moved away, while her son stayed to raise his family; but his two kids currently study in Ulan-Ude. Elena S. has five kids, but only one chose to remain in the village. Young people moving away from the village shows that they want to find another source of income and do not necessarily want to or are unable to continue with agriculture.

### **Current Subsistence Agriculture in Desyatnikovo**

Although the closing of the *kolkhoz* brought problems to the village, the practice of subsistence agriculture did not undergo any major changes. Its role did shift back to

being crucial for survival for some villagers. People are still dependent on the private plots for potatoes and vegetables, and cultivating the private plots is easier for residents than starting and supporting oneself from a private farm.

Walking around the village today one can see that every piece of harvestable land is being used as a plot. Some plots are shaped like triangles following a curve on the main road. Others are placed on hills, and some use every inch of land until it sharply drops off into the floodplain of the stream. This use of land shows that land within the village is a valuable resource and people make every effort to use all of it. They must use all of it because it is their source of food, and cultivating land within the village is easier than having a field farther away. Having a field in the village allows one to get to it quicker, and one does not need a car, saving time and money. Also, considering a portion of the village population is comprised of senior citizens, having a field within walking distance allows elderly people to continue their agricultural practices.

**Figure 4.3 Examples of private plots following the curve of the main road (Source: Elizabeth Engebretson)**





Agricultural practices of pensioners have changed over the years because of the aging process, instead of the collapse of the Soviet Union. My informants had all retired before 1991, so they were using their private plots as a means of survival while the collective system of agriculture was still in place. Instead of gaining more land during the *kolkhoz* auction, retired people often gave up some of their land because they no longer needed to cultivate as large an area. Pensioners often live alone, so they only need to feed themselves, and also lack the energy they had during their youth, which allowed them to work such long hours. Liudmila M. no longer cultivates her eighty *sotkas*, but instead uses the ten *sotkas* next to her house for subsistence agriculture. When the *kolkhoz* closed she and her son, who lives in the village, received twenty *sotkas* of land further away from the village, which they cultivate together. Even though she received land when the *kolkhoz* closed, the total amount of land she currently cultivates is less than during Soviet times.

Elena S. now only farms fourteen *sotkas* instead of the sixty she cultivated before with her family. From her fourteen *sotkas* she is able to grow a variety of vegetables. When asked about what she grows her response was “Potatoes, cabbage, onions, carrots, garlic, cucumbers, tomatoes, what more do I need?” showing that she is happy with what she is able to produce from her private plot, and does not feel like she is lacking any particular food. The fourteen *sotkas* are enough to take care of her current potato and vegetable needs. She also raises two pigs, which provided her with enough meat (Interviews 11/05).

Retirement and growing older have had other impacts on people’s agriculture and animal husbandry besides the cultivation of less land. The amount of livestock pensioners

in Desyatnikovo now raise is less than when they were younger and had families living at home. When Liudmila M's children lived at home and her husband was alive, they had two cows, pigs and twenty chickens. After her kids grew up and left home, she and her husband kept one cow, because they needed fewer dairy products, and some pigs and chickens. Now she lives by herself and only raises a pig and ten chickens. Four years ago she raised two pigs, but for the past three years she has only raised one. As she grows older the number of livestock she chooses to keep has been decreasing.

Liudmila M. and Elena S. buy their pigs from a neighboring village, using money from their pensions. Elena S. raises two pigs and buys them each April. The women raise the pigs during the spring and summer months and in November the pigs are slaughtered, providing enough *salo*<sup>7</sup>, and meat for the winter. Liudmila M. also gives some of the meat to her daughter and grandchildren, who live in Ulan-Ude, showing that one pig is more than enough for herself. The meat is often used to make large quantities of *pelmeni* and *kotlety*, meat dumplings, which are frozen and provide people with quick easy meals throughout winter. Before, when the women were younger, the pigs would be kept during the winter, but keeping a pig alive during the long cold Siberian winter requires more food and energy than the women have, so the pigs are slaughtered every November.

The price for two pigs is 5000 rubles, about \$194, whereas the price for one is 3000 rubles, \$116 (Interviews 11/05). Paying 5000 rubles or 3000 rubles for pigs is a big investment. Elena S's pension is 2500 rubles, which is about \$97 a month, so the purchase of two pigs requires two months of her pension. Because the women purchase the pigs instead of buying the meat and salo, one may assume that the purchase of a pig is

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<sup>7</sup> Salo, a common high energy food in the region, is pig lard. It is often eaten fried with potatoes.

more economical, but that assumption may not be true. When one thinks of the time, energy and cost of raising a pig, it may be more economical to simply buy the meat and salo at the store. But in this case, economics are not as important as what the women believe to be true. They believe that raising the pigs by themselves is better, and since they have always raised pigs they continue with the tradition. In the stores salo costs 150 rubles, about six dollars per kilogram, and meat costs 100 rubles, about four dollars per kilogram; but going to the store and paying for those items is a foreign concept to them and the prices seem ridiculously high. A reason that the women do not realize that buying the products would be more economical is because they do not take into account the cost of their labor. Raising a pig takes time, but the women consider that normal daily life and do not factor that into the total cost.

Having to go to another village to buy the pigs is a change from Soviet times, when all of the livestock was purchased from the *kolkhoz*. The time and transportation cost to the other village are not substantial enough to prevent the women from buying the pigs rather than just buying meat and lard. The stores in Desyatnikovo also do not have a large selection of meat, so if one wished to purchase meat frequently and have a larger selection one would have to travel to Tarbagatai or Ulan-Ude, which is a challenging trip because of transportation difficulties.

Along with raising a pig, Liudmila M. also raises ten chickens; half the number she had when she was raising a family. Like the pigs, the chickens are bought in the spring and then slaughtered in November. The chickens that are purchased are old enough to produce eggs, providing Liudmila M. with a constant supply of fresh eggs until the weather grows colder and the chickens are slaughtered. She currently buys chickens

from a chicken farm in Ulan-Ude. Instead of going to Ulan-Ude herself to buy the chickens her daughter, who lives in Ulan-Ude, brings the chickens to her in Desyatnikovo (Interviews 11/05).

Every year, Liudmila M. changes the layout of her three-*sotka* field because the vegetables grow better that way. Using crop rotation shows that the villagers understand and successfully employ techniques to increase the productivity of their subsistence agriculture. She grows a combination of cabbage, cucumbers, carrots, tomatoes, peas, onions, beets, dill, peppers and radishes, in addition to some flowers. From her private plot in 2005, Liudmila M. harvested 48 cabbages, 20 buckets of tomatoes, four buckets of Holland onions, two buckets of another type of onion, four buckets of carrots, and 200 cloves of garlic, along with peppers, dill and cucumbers. Her other field, seven *sotkas*, was completely planted with potatoes. Counting the harvest in terms of buckets shows she is not interested in kilograms, but just needs enough to feed herself and to share with her daughter.

### **Connections to Larger Urban Areas**

Because of the relatively close distance between Ulan-Ude, Tarbagatai and Desyatnikovo, one would expect that Desyatnikovo would be economically successful because of its proximity to larger urban markets and lower transportation costs for goods. But this idea only works if people have the means to make the trip to the urban center themselves, or have a way to transport their products. People in Desyatnikovo often lack the means to make the journey; thus they are isolated in the village and simply practice subsistence agriculture.

Although older residents are unable to frequently leave the village or choose not to, some younger people are able to take advantage of the market in Ulan-Ude. Liudmila M.'s neighbors sometimes travel to Ulan-Ude by *marshrutka* or car to sell their milk. The fact that they do not sell the milk regularly shows that the market in Ulan-Ude does not provide them with a major part of their income. In addition to selling their milk occasionally in Ulan-Ude, her neighbors also sell it to other residents of Desyatnikovo (Interviews 11/05). They are able to operate this enterprise without having a significant amount of extra land because the cows wander around the village to feed.

Transportation to and from Desyatnikovo is not readily accessible for everyone. If one owns a car or has easy access to a car, travel is not a problem. A car also provides villagers with much more freedom to travel around the area to either different fields, the forest to pick berries or to other places they may need to go, but not everyone has the luxury of owning a car. Without a car the journey to Tarbagatai or Ulan-Ude is more challenging because the only way to get to there is by *marshrutka*, which come infrequently, or the more expensive option of a taxi. If one is unable to get a *marshrutka*, the only other option is to try to "catch a car," which is hitchhiking, to a closer village and then take a *marshrutka* from there to Ulan-Ude. Patience is required for this method, because although a fair amount of traffic is on the main road, much of it consists of trucks and motorcades of new cars bought in Vladivostok, neither of which often stop to pick up hitchhikers.

**Figure 4.4 Types of Transportation from the Desyatnikovo to Ulan-Ude**

Mode of Transportation	Cost (one way)	Frequency	Estimated Time to Ulan-Ude
<i>Marshrutka</i>	From the village to Ulan-Ude 45-50 rubles, from Tarbagatai 30 rubles	Early in the morning, 5:45am, 6:30am and 7:30am, afternoon 3:00pm	Around 2 hours, because of stops and the need to sometimes switch <i>marshrutkas</i>
Taxi	500-600 rubles	Whenever, although need to find or call one, and if from the village, must wait for the taxi to arrive because they come from Ulan-Ude	45 minutes to an hour once in the taxi
Hitchhiking	Free-10 rubles	Patience, depends on how much and what type of traffic on the road	Desyatnikovo to Tarbagatai 10-15 minutes, once in a car

From the chart one can see that the transportation out of the village, without owning a car, is not an easy task. The prices of *marshrutkas* are affordable for the pensioners in the village but the amount of time the journey takes is not worth the lower price. Pensioners are responsible for running their households and taking care of their livestock, and therefore do not have the luxury to spend two hours traveling to an urban center. Taxis are not within the price range of the pensioners. Liudmila M. was shocked to hear that I had paid 600 rubles for a taxi back to her house, showing that it is not something she would chose to spend her money on or could afford regularly because of her limited pension.

Instead of pensioners leaving the village, their children and grandchildren come to them from other urban areas, sometimes bringing goods with them and often returning home with food. Liudmila M. said the last time she had visited her daughter in Ulan-Ude was four months ago, but instead her daughter makes the trip to Desyatnikovo, sometimes bringing chickens and sometimes returning with meat or vegetables for herself. Elena S. said she made the trip to Ulan-Ude rarely, even though her son lives

there, because he and her other children who live farther away come to visit her.

Therefore she has no reason to leave Desyatnikovo. Because people are able to produce the majority of their food, buy other items in local stores and have their families visit them, they do not need to travel to Ulan-Ude or Tarbagatai frequently. Family members who visit Desyatnikovo take food back home with them, so food leaves the village without the residents having to travel. An example of this is Liudmila M. sharing half the pig with her daughter and also giving her some of the potatoes and vegetables. Liudmila M.'s daughter does not have a *dacha*, but all of her vegetable and potato needs are taken care of by her mother's private plot. These examples show that it is more common and easier for people from urban centers to travel to the village than for villagers to travel to urban areas. The reasons people travel to the village from urban areas are to visit family and to acquire food (Interviews 11/05).

In addition to family members taking food from the village, some food is sold along the main road in the village. The road provides the village with passing motorists, a possible market for their goods produced on private plots and an added source of currency. During September one can see women lined along the road selling potatoes and other vegetables to the passing motorists. Although the road provides a market for vegetables, it also creates competition amongst the villages located along the road, which can make selling one's vegetables and potatoes a more challenging task.

The closing of the *kolkhoz* created an agricultural void that has thus far has been unfilled. Instead of filling the void with other forms of large-scale agriculture and private farms, private plot production has increased. Because of this increase, agriculture in Desyatnikovo today is primarily subsistence agriculture. Pensioners practice subsistence

agriculture in part out of tradition and in part because they need a more reliable and affordable food source. Others practice subsistence agriculture because they have no other options for food. Some younger and middle-aged people have the drive to start private farms, and made attempts but have thus far been unable to make a living successfully as private farmers. The situation is exacerbated by the distance to Moscow and the lack of an effective transportation system.



## Chapter Five: Analysis and Findings

After examining agriculture in Desyatnikovo and looking at Buryatia as a whole, some important ideas with regard to the current agricultural situation and political ecology come to light. These ideas include differing views of local people about their current agricultural practices, problems with the dominant agricultural narrative promoted by international development organizations and the Russian state, and the current agricultural situation of different minority groups in Buryatia. From this discussion aspects of political ecology can be adjusted and thus better applied to Russia and possibly other areas in the post-Soviet world. Also, from analyzing the above notions one can better conjecture about the future of agriculture in Russia.

### Varying Views of Current Subsistence Agriculture in Buryatia

The predominant and most productive form of agriculture in Buryatia today is subsistence agriculture on private plots. Subsistence agriculture is not a new practice in the countryside because people cultivated private plots, as well as worked on the *kolkhoz* during Soviet times. In addition, before collectivization subsistence agriculture was the most common type of agriculture in the Russian countryside (Lewin, 1994). Subsistence agriculture is not a new phenomenon. The predominance of subsistence agriculture after the collapse of the Soviet Union can be attributed to the fact that very few other forms of agriculture were able to survive in the market economy and uncertain times. Therefore people were forced into subsistence agriculture, because other agricultural endeavors were not always profitable and people needed a way to feed themselves. Growing one's own food is also the only option available to many rural residents because stores in villages often do not have a large selection of products and the products they sell are

often expensive, which makes them unaffordable for unemployed villagers. Although subsistence agriculture is often the only available option for survival in rural areas, people hold differing opinions on the topic, which can most easily be broken down along generation lines. The older generation in the Desyatnikovo, those residents who had retired before 1991, view subsistence agriculture positively, while the middle-aged people and the younger generations have negative attitudes towards it.

The older residents of the community generally happily practice subsistence agriculture because it is something they have always done and cannot imagine life without it. The elderly generation in the village was not as affected by the collapse of the Soviet Union because they were already retired and thus did not lose their jobs on the *sovkhozes* and *kolkhozes*. But they did lose the cash value of their pensions, which was a strong factor in the turn toward subsistence. During the transition, they continued practicing basically the same form of agriculture as during Soviet times. Additionally, retired villagers still receive their state pensions from their former *kolkhoz* jobs, which can be considered a type of state support. The pensions are generally not enough to solely survive on, but they do help older villagers buy some products.

Older rural Russians have fed themselves from their private plots for as long as they can remember. I asked Mikhail P. if his food had come from the *kolkhoz* and he said that it all came from his private plot and that he had farmed his whole life. Numerous times I was asked about where my food came from and if I had a *dacha*. Every time I mentioned that I bought all of my food, because I lived in an urban area and did not have a *dacha*, people were surprised. Liudmila M. asked me three times about my *dacha*, showing that she does not understand someone not at least producing some of his or her

own food and needing to buy everything (Interviews 11/05). This surprise shows that she has always produced her own food and cannot imagine life without subsistence agriculture.

Even though the pensioners are growing older, they continue to grow their own vegetables and raise animals at the subsistence level. Elena S's son offered to give her potatoes, but her response was that she could and would do it herself. She takes great pride in the fact that she does everything herself and considers herself well off because of it. Her son offering to give her food shows that practicing subsistence agriculture is not a necessity and that she could obtain food from other sources. Yet, she still chooses to provide for herself and continue the tradition. This shows that subsistence agriculture is an important part of her life and she will continue to do it as long as she is physically able, even if it means cultivating less and less land and raising fewer animals for shorter periods of time; changes that have come about because of her age rather than the changing political and economic structures.

Subsistence agriculture in the village can be analyzed as part of the "tool kit" of the local culture. This model, presented by Ann Swidler, states that culture consists of a variety of everyday activities that are performed and these activities are either positively or negatively reinforced by the environment and situations. The successful activities are repeated until the environment no longer positively reinforces them and then people look into their "tool kit" for another activity (O'Brien and Wegren, 2002). In the Desyatnikovo, practicing subsistence agriculture has been positively reinforced for pensioners, so they continue to practice subsistence agriculture and have not needed to look for a new method for access to food in their cultural "tool kit".

Rural Russians have a collective memory of a time when people lacked access to basic goods, such as vegetables and dairy products, and therefore were forced to produce them. In the past, people had to cultivate their private plots for survival and were often dependent on them, because they were the only available food source. It was impossible to buy dairy products or vegetables in the village stores, if the village had a store, so people had to produce the goods themselves. Thus people, especially in the older generations, have been producing their own food for many years and cannot imagine life another way. Now, when the stores have a limited selection of dairy products and potatoes, people could purchase the items, but instead they continue to grow their own because it is what they have always known and it is their way of life. Elderly people also do not look at other possibilities, because growing their own food has been successful for generations. Thus, they continue to practice subsistence agriculture even if today there maybe more economical and less time consuming options.

Middle-aged people generally have more negative feelings about subsistence agriculture than other age groups because they lost the most during the economic transition in the early 1990s. One day they were employed on the *kolkhoz* and almost the next day they were either unemployed or part of unprofitable agricultural enterprises and economically insecure. Middle-aged people want to practice agriculture at a larger scale than the subsistence level, but have often been unable to. The younger people who only practice subsistence agriculture and do not receive pensions or other type of supplementary income are generally living in poverty and are worse off economically than during Soviet times. The state support offered in the Soviet Union has disappeared

and if one only practices subsistence agriculture it is difficult to pay for electricity, food that cannot be produced from the private plot, such as flour and oil, and livestock.

Part of the negative feelings towards subsistence agriculture, held by the younger generations stem from the perceived loss of social status, both nationally and internationally as well as the loss of economic status. As part of the Soviet agricultural system, the workers were producing food for a world superpower. People were awarded honors for hard work, such as the Lenin Labor Award, and believed that they were furthering the goals of the Soviet Revolution. In short, they perceived their work mattered on an international scale, but that international importance has now disappeared.

As well as the perceived international importance, people also took pride in the amount of work they completed and now want to work to their full potential, or at least be able to make a living. During the Soviet era people would work a full day on the *kolkhoz*, and in the mornings and evenings they would devote their energy to their private plot and personal livestock. Thus, people would work a double, or in the case of women, a triple shift (Interviews 11/05). Now with just a private plot and limited amount of livestock to occupy their time people, especially among the middle-aged population, do not feel as productive and almost like failures.

The perceived loss of status has caused depression and social problems in rural areas because people, especially middle-aged men, see no other future and are unhappy with simply practicing subsistence agriculture. The unhappiness can be seen in the two examples of men from Desyatnikovo who wanting to start private farms, but were unable to succeed. Now, one is unemployed and the other has a menial job, but both must practice subsistence agriculture in order to survive (Interviews 11/05). Because of the

increase in poverty and decrease in social status, middle-aged men often turn to alcohol. It is not uncommon to see drunken men wandering around Desyatnikovo at any time of day. Along with alcoholism comes petty crime, such as stealing other peoples' meat and flour. People turn to stealing because they do not have enough money to purchase the goods (Interviews 11/05).

Internalizing subsistence agriculture as a negative practice is not the only reason that some villagers are unhappy with their current situation. The government and international development organizations have also contributed to the negative perceptions of subsistence agriculture. The World Bank believes that the reforms of the 1990s have been unsuccessful because a large segment of the agricultural industry has not yet joined the global market (Mudahar, 1998). This view fails to take into account that the rural population has, for the most part, been able to feed itself, which can be seen through the increase in household production during the 1990s. The Russian state thought that private farms would become the future of Russian agriculture, and subsistence agriculture did not help join the global economy and was thus viewed negatively (Bonanno, 1998). The government and World Bank are two of the more powerful voices in the discourse about Russian agriculture. Therefore their negative views on subsistence agriculture have an influence on the both the national and international communities.

Instead of only practicing subsistence agriculture in the village, another segment of the middle-aged and younger generations have left the village to look for work outside of the agricultural sector. In Desyatnikovo, the majority of the population is elderly because many of the younger people have left. If this trend continues the village will die within the next few generations. The out migration from rural areas shows that younger

people are not satisfied with practicing subsistence agriculture and want to have opportunities to do something more profitable with their lives.

### **Problematizing the Dominant Agricultural Narrative**

The dominant agricultural narrative promulgated by the Russian state and international development organizations is that Russian private farms must join the global economic system and become successful producers (Bonanno, 1998). Although becoming part of a system that would possibly allow for profitable enterprises and increased standards of living sounds like a promising idea, some problems exist when attempting to implement this narrative in the Russian countryside.

First, the idea of Western agriculture is considered to be ethnocentric by some authors and other authors have called western farming a social construct (Netting, 1997, Bonanno, 1998). Therefore, implementing the Western notion of farming in other places can be at times problematic. Netting defines Western agriculture as following an Old World Pattern where

“...bread grains were planted in pure stands once or twice a year; domestic animals were maintained for milk, meat and draft purposes; and fodder was stored when natural forage was not obtainable. Fields were plowed and used annually, with fertility maintained by manuring and crop rotation. Farms and livestock were privately owned, and land and labor entered the market” (Netting, 1977: 60).

From this definition one can see some similarities with Russian agricultural practices, but also some differences. Russian agricultural practices include animal husbandry, and the larger scale operations store fodder and plant bread grains. Russian agriculture breaks from the definition of Western agriculture on the premise of private ownership and market entry. Historically, Russian agriculture operated under a feudal system. After the serfs were freed, agriculture was mainly subsistence until collectivization when a

combination of subsistence and large-scale agriculture operated simultaneously. A thriving private farm sector that is part of a larger capitalist market is a foreign concept for the Russian countryside (Bonanno, 1998).

The differences between Russian and Western agriculture are based on different histories and cultural ideas. It is argued that the current Western idea of small private farms is a social construct, based on the specific historical conditions of Western countries (Bonanno, 1998). Small private farms in the capitalist system have been successful in Western countries, so development organizations and other countries have looked towards that model without realizing or acknowledging different cultural environments. Also, the concept of the small private farmer has spread internationally because many of the large international development organizations started in the Western world. As discussed in Chapter Two, these organizations do not always work within the cultural context of a given country, but attempt to implement plans based on Western cultural ideas.

Another difference Netting highlights between Western agrarian practices and the rest of the world is that “Private ownership of the means of production has long been one of the sacred doctrines of many Western nations” (Netting, 1977: 77). Private ownership of the means of production is a concept that directly contradicts the ideas of communism, and thus is something that is foreign to rural Russians after almost a century of communist rule. In order to be a private farmer in the market economy, private ownership of the land and means of production is important. Land ownership and tenure in Russia is a very complicated concept. During the Soviet period private plots were not privately owned, although all of the goods from the plots were used to feed the workers who



cultivated and harvested that land. After 1991, legislation about the land market varied. One of Yeltsin's first decrees about the agricultural system allowed for the exchanging and leasing of land from the divided *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*, but not for buying or selling of land. The law was changed in 1993 so people could buy and sell land, as long as it was used for agricultural practices (Wegren, 2005). If a person inherited land, he could sell it, but only after he waited for the imposed ten year moratorium to end (Bonanno, 199).

Even though officially it is legal to buy and sell land, land transactions often occur informally in rural areas. When residents of Desyatnikovo were asked about who owns the land, the responses were often unclear. Liudmila M. pays a small amount of rent to the village government each year for her private plots, which shows that she still does not own the means of production herself. Also, she received some of the current land she uses after her neighbor died; an example of land changing hands informally. A thriving land market is something that contributes to a thriving agricultural sector in a market economy, but areas in rural Russia are lacking a land market. Not having a land market or an understanding of private ownership makes implementing the idea of Western farming more challenging in Russia.

In addition to not entirely grasping the idea of private ownership of the means of production, rural Russians also lack an understanding of other key concepts of the capitalist economic system. Villagers do not understand how to think like capitalists and function in a market economy; therefore they do not always make the best economic decisions because more attention is given to the land and not to the business aspects of the farm. In order to operate a profitable private farm in a capitalist system, one must

have knowledge of how that capitalist system works and the terms associated with it. Rural Russians are often unfamiliar with the concepts of “individualism, entrepreneurship, risk taking, accumulation of wealth and, above all competition...” (Bonanno, 1998: 226). Lacking an understanding of crucial capitalist terms makes becoming a profitable member of the market economy extremely difficult.

Besides not understanding basic words that are part of the capitalist system, rural Russians have a greater comprehension of words that are more foreign in the capitalist system. These concepts include security of employment, economic equality, and limited inputs in the decision making process (Bonanno, 1998). In the global economic market, employment is not guaranteed, there is little economic equality and in a purely capitalist system inputs in the decision making process should be limitless.

Russia, especially Siberia, is an interesting place when attempting to compare and contrast Western notions of agricultural with Russian and/or Siberian notions. First, because Russia is so large one single idea of agriculture does not exist. Traditional agricultural practices differ among minority groups and across places. Some of these different practices have been diminished because of the forced standardized of agricultural methods during collectivization. Now, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, minority groups have the freedom to return to traditional practices, although not always the necessary means. When Netting and other early cultural ecologists compared and contrasted ethnocentric Western agriculture to other agrarian systems, these systems were generally located in developing countries in the global south with different historical contexts and environments. When comparing Russia to other Western countries, the historical contexts are not quite as different and the differing forms of agriculture, at least

ethnic Russian agriculture, are more similar. But enough differences do exist that, especially with regards to private property and ownership, one can begin to see why the Western agricultural construct of the small private farm in a market economy is currently not succeeding in Russia.

### **Alternatives to the Dominant Agricultural Narrative**

Since the current system and strategy for agrarian reform is not working as hoped, the Russian government and international development organizations should critically examine the situation and change or shift their tactics. Because the household producers are leading in terms of agricultural output, working within that framework may yield more productive results than simply spreading the dominant narrative against subsistence agriculture. Attempts should be made at using the private plots as a starting point from which to slowly expand and enlarge agricultural enterprises into private farms, if that is what local people wish. Focusing on the needs and desires of the local people, especially those who want to become incorporated into the global market, could provide valuable insight and possibly help facilitate a successful transition into larger markets. Also, reforms instigated from the local level and brought to the central government may be more successful because the legislation will encompass local needs and ideas (Wegen, 1998).

If entrance into the global economic system is a desired goal of local people, improvements within Russia will need to be made with the help of the state, although local people can also take some steps to improve the situation without state intervention. First, a more developed transportation system should be implemented so rural producers have the ability to transport their goods to larger markets, especially in extremely remote

and isolated areas. Connecting areas by highways or railroads will help in this process. A better transportation system will also allow for easier transport of necessary agricultural inputs, if villagers can afford them.

Besides state programs, local people could join together to find creative solutions to overcome the transportation challenges. A major road connects Desyatnikovo with Ulan-Ude, but not all of the current transportation options are feasible for a single person transporting goods. A taxi is too expensive for one person to make the trip, and transporting a large quantity of agricultural products in a crowded *marshrutka* or while hitchhiking is not a practical option. But, these obstacles could be overcome if a villager bought a car and then ran a taxi service or organized a carpooling option for villagers to bring goods to the markets in Ulan-Ude. The villager could even just transport people's goods so the villagers staying behind could still tend to their households. One reason that innovative solutions are not present in Desyatnikovo, may be that people are too comfortable in their old habits, do not want to take a risk and start something new, or have simply given up hope. As mentioned earlier, risk taking and entrepreneurship are not concepts easily understood by rural Russians (Bonanno, 1998).

It appears that at least some rural residents have a desire to start private farming operations, but at this time have been unable to do so. In some cases this inability stems from lack of machinery and/or financial support. The Russia state has set up plans for financial support, so these plans need to be better implemented, especially in areas where the willingness to start private farms is greater. The government needs to find ways to follow through with its proposed programs and plans. The Buryat government has ideas

that are often in line with those of the local people, but these plans must be pushed into action.

Another reason farming operations have not been profitable is because of the lack of understanding about how the capitalist market economy works. Because certain key concepts are foreign to the new farmers, they are not able to succeed in the strange new economic environment. A seemingly easy solution, albeit expensive, would be to implement business education programs in villages across the country. Topics covered could include how to be successful in a competitive market economy, tips for starting a small business and how to minimize risks yet still make a profit. Classes and workshops such as these could possibly inspire other villagers to start a taxi or transport service. The notion of offering classes and workshops is itself ethnocentric, so the project would have to be tailored to best fit the local cultural climate. The structure of the program would also have to vary with the differing environments and identities found across Russia.

Because a variety of agricultural practices exist across Russia, working within the traditional framework and using local knowledge systems could improve the agricultural output of Russia as well as people's livelihoods. In Buryatia specifically, a long tradition of animal husbandry exists. Programs aimed at reviving these traditional practices may see higher profit yields and people may be more willing to participate in activities that are specifically part of their cultural heritage.

Not all minority groups within Russia, such as the Old Believers, have distinctive agricultural practices. This may be because agriculture may not be historically significant to all groups and/or because of collectivization. Agricultural practices in Desyatnikovo, traditionally an Old Believer village, do not appear all that different from the agricultural

practices described in Tory, a predominantly Buryat village. The agricultural practices probably resemble each other because of similar climatic conditions and the historical legacy of collectivization. Because not much cultural difference with regards to agriculture is present, a more standardized approach could be used in the communities.

### **Changing Political Ecology by Looking at Russian Agriculture**

As discussed in Chapter Two, not all aspects of political ecology can simply be applied in Russia or the post-Soviet world as they would in the developing or third world context. The idea of the state and its relationship to international organization needed adjustment, as well as the degradation and marginalization thesis. After using political ecology to examine agricultural change in post-Soviet Russia and specifically in Buryatia, other important observations can be made about applying the discipline to the post-Soviet world.

One criticism of political ecology work is the demonization of globalization and the international market economy (Sutton and Anderson, 2005). Entrance into the global capitalist system has caused environmental degradation and social marginalization in many developing countries, because of the sole reliance on a cash crop and the loss of alternative livelihood strategies. Because of this, the global economic system is often seen in a negative light and academics question if becoming part of the system is the best option. Russia seems to be experiencing a different situation. A cash crop for the country has not been found and joining larger economic markets has proved extremely challenging, yet at least certain elements of the population still want to be part of it.

Environmental degradation is occurring across Russia, but the initial damage took place during the Soviet period. Current agricultural practices do not seem to be causing as

much degradation as in the past, especially since the main goal of agricultural production is no longer quantity over quality, and local people have greater control over production. Therefore, people are now attempting to make a living off of land that had been marginalized before they ever had a chance to cultivate it independently. One reason there is less environmental degradation today is because of the increased costs of inputs such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Because fewer people can afford them, less is applied to the land. Also, the environmental degradation during the Soviet period was not because of entrance into the international economy or from globalization, but rather from a country rejecting the global economic system and attempting to be self sufficient with intense state intervention. This shows that similar results have occurred in the developing world and Russia, but for different reasons.

Another major theme of political ecology work is marginalization. Siberia and specifically Buryatia are marginalized places within Russia, but minority groups within the areas do not seem to face any greater marginalization because of their minority status. Marginalization in Siberia is not a new phenomenon, but rather extends back to the time when Siberia was incorporated into the Russian Empire. Historically Siberia was a place for exiles such as the Old Believer population. Although exiled populations have been successful and well established in the region, many Russians still view Siberia, especially the rural areas, as backwards, harsh, wild and desolate. This view is even held by Russians who live in Siberian urban centers, such as Irkutsk. Since urban Siberians view the Siberian countryside negatively, one can only imagine how politicians from European Russia view the area.

In addition to living in a place perceived as marginal, the Old Believers constitute a minority population. This may cause one to assume that they would face greater oppression because of their minority status, but after examination it appears that the Old Believers have not been significantly marginalized. When they were first exiled to Siberia one could consider them a marginalized population, but with time they have been able to overcome it. During Soviet times it does not appear that the Old Believers were extremely marginalized. In 1971, the *kolkhoz* in Desyatnikovo was one of the richest in the area, showing that the Old Believers had not been forced onto marginal land and were able to succeed in the Soviet system. Also, because the workers were able to survive from their private plots, it appears that the land must not have been too infertile or marginal, although the plots probably did not constitute the most productive agricultural lands.

When comparing the current agriculture in Desyatnikovo with that in Tory, many similarities rather than differences appear. One might expect that a Buryat village would be favored over an Old Believer village in the Republic of Buryatia, but this does not seem to be the case. In both villages private plots are the most successful producers, people want to start private farms but are facing numerous challenges, and segments of the population sell extra goods along the roadside instead of transporting goods to larger nearby markets. Private farmers in Tory have showed more initiative and innovative thinking than in Desyatnikovo by operating small businesses in addition to private farms. These examples show that current agricultural practices in both villages are very similar, although different minority groups inhabit each village. Therefore it seems that at neither the Old Believers or the Buryats are being marginalized more than the other.



## Conclusion

After examining the government's reforms and comparing the goals with the situation in Buryatia, a tremendous disconnect appears. Throughout the 1990s, the Russian state advocated private farms, but the number of private farms across the country has decreased and the output of subsistence farmers has increased dramatically. From interviews in Buryatia it is evident that people want to start private farms, but are unable to due to lack of machinery and capital. The government promised reforms. Because of its inability to follow through, people are forced into subsistence agriculture or leave the villages to try to find jobs in the urban areas.

The inability of the government to implement reforms in Siberia can be attributed to the lack of political power that Siberia, and specifically the Republic of Buryatia, has because of the great political and physical distance separating it from Moscow. Because of the lack of political power, agriculture in the Republic of Buryatia has not been a main priority for the Kremlin and it has effectively slipped through the bureaucratic cracks in Moscow. An example of this is that the *kolkhozes* in Desyatnikovo and Tory operated well after the original date set for reorganization.

Subsistence agriculture is now the most common and most productive type of agriculture in Russia. Its prevalence can be traced to the changing political system and the failure of economic reforms initiated by the Russian state. Subsistence agriculture has been a part of the agricultural landscape for hundreds of years and is now filling the void left by the *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*.

Not everyone is satisfied with practicing subsistence farming, and even with the ideological support of the state and development, attempts at private farms have not been

overly successful. Russia is a strong established state, but it still cannot achieve its desired goals with regards to the agricultural sector. Political ecology suggests that Russia should be able to implement its desired plan, because that state has a great deal of power and entrance to the international market economy should not be difficult. The case of agriculture in Russia shows that incorporation into larger economic markets is not a given, and even established states cannot always implement their desired reform goals. International development organizations also want private Russian farms to become major economic players, but the power of international organizations is lessened by the Russian state attempting to exert its power and maintain its authority.

The Russian state has to overcome challenges, namely distance, that most other states do not face. Being the largest country in the world with a diverse population presents an array of problems. First, without an extensive transportation infrastructure, Russian agriculture will not be able to compete in larger markets, nationally or internationally. Besides physical distance the Russian state and citizens face the challenge of political distance. Residents of Buryatia are not benefiting from reforms from Moscow because of the great distance. The Kremlin has to juggle many populations and issues and unfortunately for Buryatia, it is not a high priority.

Because of the complicated power dynamics between the Russian state and international organizations, as well as between the government in Moscow and Siberia, agriculture has become predominantly subsistence. People need to eat and since very few other livelihood options exist in rural areas, people practice subsistence agriculture in order to survive. Subsistence agriculture provides them with a reliable food source, and the practice can be seen as carrying on a cultural tradition in some areas. It appears like

this trend will continue until the Russian state, possibly with the help of international development organizations, is able to overcome the physical and political distance hampering its agricultural reform goals.

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- Informants for Fieldwork, all interviews (5 total) and conversations during November 2005. Elena S, Liudmila M, Sergei I, Mikhail P are pseudonyms for informants mentioned in the paper. Informed consent was given by all informants to make their interviews public.