The Sovnarkhoz reform of 1957 was designed by Khrushchev to improve efficiency in the Soviet economic system by decentralizing economic decision making from all-Union branch ministries in Moscow to the governments of the individual republics and regional economic councils. Based on extensive original research, including unpublished archival material, this book examines the reform, discussing the motivations for it, which included Khrushchev’s attempt to strengthen his own power base. The book explores how the process of reform was implemented, especially its impact on the republics, and analyzes why the reform, which was reversed in 1959, failed. Overall, the book reveals a great deal about the workings, and the shortcomings, of the Soviet economic system at its height.

Nataliya Kibita is an Honorary Research Fellow and seminar tutor in the Faculty of Law, Business and Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow. She is also a teaching fellow at the University of Edinburgh, UK.
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Soviet Economic Management under Khrushchev
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Nataliya Kibita
To Adam and for Aglaya
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Foreword

In his epic biography, William Taubman referred to Khrushchev’s ‘daring but bumbling attempt to reform communism’. Khrushchev was certainly a reformer, but were his efforts ‘bumbling’ or was their failure down to something more structural in the Soviet state? Khrushchev’s other biographer, William Tompson, wrote in an article comparing Khrushchev and Gorbachev that ‘to speak of the apparatus’ opposition to reform in both the Khrushchev and Gorbachev periods is clearly a simplification of its position, but it is not an unjustified oversimplification’. Resistance to Khrushchev’s reforms on the part of those affected by them is the key to understanding why Khrushchev’s reforms appeared so ‘bumbling’. At a meeting with Fidel Castro in May 1963, some eighteen months before his removal from office, Khrushchev declared: ‘you’d think as First Secretary I could change anything in this country – like hell I can! No matter what changes I propose and carry out, everything stays the same’.

Arguably Khrushchev’s most radical reform, certainly as far as the economy was concerned, was the decision in 1957 to take economic power away from the Moscow-based economic ministries, which had held sway under Stalin, and decentralize power to a series of regional ‘councils of the national economy’, sovety narodnogo khozyaistva or sovarkhozy. As Nataliya Kibita shows, this was very much Khrushchev’s idea, a reform arising from earlier initiatives towards strengthening the powers of the republics taken in the years between Stalin’s death in 1953 and Khrushchev’s denunciation of him in 1956. So, when in 1963 these councils were brought under the control of a country-wide USSR Council of the National Economy, Khrushchev’s reform seemed to have been stood on its head, and the old centralized economic administration recreated in a new guise.

By taking Ukraine as the focus of her study, Kibita is able to move away from a top-down discussion of what the reform was meant to be and provide the reader with a bottom-up vision of the Sovnarkhoz reform’s implementation at republican level. What she explores in this detailed analysis of the implementation and evolution of the reform is the inter-relationship between the various layers of the administration responsible for restructuring resource allocation, the process of constant negotiation and renegotiation of powers between councils and ministries,
and the slow but sure resurgence of forces pushing for recentralization. When the reform was first implemented, the Moscow Party Secretary commented to a colleague: ‘What shall we do? They’re appointing people we have never heard of to these councils’. And, true enough, many of the turf wars about how to enact the reform involved bitter disputes over the deployment of personnel. However, behind the issue of personnel was the broader issue of where would power lie: was planning to be based ‘below’, where those responsible knew what was happening to the economy, or was it to be based ‘above’, where those responsible knew what ought to be happening?

Kibita shows clearly that the resurgence of centralizing tendencies can be traced back to 1959, and that the vanguard institution in this process was GOSPLAN. At first its moves were strongly resisted, but gradually its view prevailed: that the interests of the country as a whole were paramount, and that the rights the reform had given to republican administrations were just manifestations of ‘localism’. Yet this was a slow and contested process, for resistance was not overcome until November 1962 when the principle of recentralization was finally conceded and the moves began to establish an All-Union Sovnarkhoz in March 1963. The Sovnarkhoz reform was quietly abandoned as soon as Khrushchev was overthrown in October 1964.

Kibita’s study of the Sovnarkhoz reform gives us a unique insight into the frustrations of being a reformer in the Soviet administration, frustrations shared by Khrushchev. As she notes in the conclusion: ‘the central apparat proved more rigid than Khrushchev expected and stayed true to its values … [making] a remarkable demonstration of its power to protect its own interests’. Kibita concludes that the Sovnarkhoz reform began well with a dramatic increase in production, and that after 1959 ‘each recentralization impulse exacerbated the [subsequent] slow down in growth’. The logic is clear; the origins of the economic sclerosis of the Brezhnev years can be found in GOSPLAN’s resurgence during its struggle against Khrushchev’s sovnarkhozy. Kibita makes this clear in the Brezhnev era joke which opens her study: at the annual parade on the anniversary of the October Revolution, Brezhnev is curious to know who the four young men in black suits are who bring up the rear of the parade; he is informed that they are ‘the boys from GOSPLAN’ who despite their modest appearance have ‘huge destructive power’. GOSPLAN, destroyer of the Soviet Union – no truer word was spoken in jest.

Geoffrey Swain
Alec Nove Chair in Russian and East European Studies, University of Glasgow.
'Ideology tends to fade over time when it runs counter to the behavioral sources of individual wealth maximizing, as recent events in Eastern Europe attest'.\(^1\) Douglass North wrote this in 1990. The Soviet Union had not disintegrated yet, but the Eastern bloc had, and the ideas of the market economy penetrated the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe. In the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev was still struggling with the results of *perestroika* and its impact on the Soviet system.

In 1985, Gorbachev launched *perestroika*, which was supposed to introduce elements of the market economy into the Soviet system and give the Soviet economy a jump-start. He carried on with the communist ideology, and did not question the integrity of the Soviet state. In the new institutional system, decision making was decentralized. He fully, and inevitably, relied on the Party and the state machine to enforce decentralization and guarantee the enforcement of contracts. Still, control over resources was lost.

There are plenty of theories on why and how the Soviet Union disintegrated and more theories will appear as our knowledge of various aspects of the Soviet system expands.

The purpose of this book is not to give another account of the collapse of the Soviet Union, but rather to contribute to the understanding of those fragile links within the Soviet system that determined its weakness. This book is about the first failed attempt to formally decentralize economic decision making in the Soviet Union 34 years prior to *perestroika*, the *Sovnarkhoz* reform. The book discusses the application of the *Sovnarkhoz* reform in the second largest Union republic, Ukraine, and the relations between the centre (Moscow) and the periphery (Ukrainian SSR).

Despite its rigid political structure and centrally administered planned economy, the Soviet system exhibited quite a few features of a huge corporation. The success and efficiency of both depended highly on the balance between the central political and economic control and decentralized decision making and resource management; on the expedient communication of relevant and up-to-date information from the bottom of production to the decision makers; and on the incentive structure that should induce all participants to make decisions for common benefit.
The book explores an attempt of the Soviet leadership to find the golden mean between central policy making and peripheral policy implementation. The similar attempt made by Gorbachev led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In the 1950s and early 1960s, however, the devotion of the republican leaders to the Soviet system was not questioned. The economic opportunities that opened up with the reform did not expand to the point where the republican leaders questioned their belief in the advantages of the planned economy over the market economy. Thus, the Sovnarkhoz reform did not have drastic consequences for the integrity of the Soviet federation. Nonetheless, the reform revealed that decentralized decision making led to the loss of control over resources by the centre and did not make the centre any better informed on the economy. The republic-level authorities, on whom the CC CPSU relied to protect the all-Union interests in the republics, were as responsive to the incentives of wealth- or power-maximizing as those whom they were supposed to control, the regional economic councils and enterprises. Political defection was a matter of time.

The Sovnarkhoz reform was a rather positive page in Ukraine’s Soviet history. It was the only relatively long period when the Ukrainian leadership was in a strong position and was strongly motivated to enhance the republican rights and protect republican interests.

Note

Acknowledgements

This book is a result of a long process of reworking and rethinking my PhD thesis which I submitted to the University of Geneva in 2008. After the defence, my thesis advisor Wladimir Berelowitch encouraged me to write a book and so after a short break I ‘re-plunged’ into the subject. I am very grateful to him for the encouragement to write a book and his belief in my ability to do so.

To the best of my skills, I have tried to address all outstanding issues that were brought up at the defence as well as at the conferences and seminars where I was given a chance to present my work. I give my thanks to Donald Filtzer, Jeremy Smith, Valerii Vasil’ev, Peter Duncan, Stephen White, Terry Cox and all those commenters who expressed their opinion on my findings at my presentations. Thanks also to the Department of Central and East European Studies at the University of Glasgow for providing me with a supportive academic environment, and to Sarah Lennon for editing my manuscript.

The book, I believe, has considerably improved as a result of the penetrating and judicious comments of Geoffrey Swain. I am greatly indebted to him for sharing his ideas with me and for his patient availability at the final stage of writing, as well as for contributing the foreword.

I could not have finished working on this book without the dedicated support of my family. My deep gratitude and appreciation goes to my husband, whose endurance was tested during our lengthy discussion of the Soviet economic system and whose comments and arguments were of great value to me in clarifying my thoughts; and to my mother for her immeasurable help during the last year of working on the book which, coincidentally, happened to be the first year of life of our daughter.
Abbreviations

CC CPSU  Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CC CPUk  Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine
CM      Council of Ministers
CMUk    Council of Ministers of Ukraine
FYP     Five Year Plan
Glavk   Line production administration of a ministry
Glavkhimsbyt Main department for sales of chemical production
Glavkomplekt(y) Main department(s) for sales of equipment and installations
Glavmetallosbyt Main department for sales of metal production
Glavsbyt(y) Main administration(s) for sales
Glavsnabsbyt(y) Main department(s) for supplies and sales
GlUMPP  Main administration(s) for inter-republican deliveries
Gorkom(y) City (or town) Committee of the Communist Party
Gosbank State Bank
Gosekonomkomissiya USSR CM State Commission for current operational planning
Gosekonomsovet USSR CM State Scientific and Economic Council
Goskontrol’ Party-State control
Gosplan  State Planning Committee (Commission)
Gosstroi USSR CM State Committee for Construction
Ispolkom(y) Executive committee(s)
Kolkhoz Collective farm
Kolkhoznik(i) Collective farm member(s)
Kraikom(y) Territorial committee(s) of the Communist Party
Obkom(y) Regional committee(s) of the Communist Party
Oblast’(i) Province(s)
Oblispolkom(y) Regional executive committee(s)
Oblstatupravlenie Oblast’ statistical agency
xxii Abbreviations

**Prombank**  Industrial Bank

**Raikom(y)**  District committee(s) of the Communist Party

**Rayon**  District

**Sbyt(y)**  Sales organ(s)

**Sel’khozbank**  Agricultural Bank

**Snab(y)**  Supply organ(s)

**Snabsbyt(y)**  Supply and sales organ(s)

**Sovkhozy**  State farms

**Sovnarkhoz(y)**  Council(s) of the national economy

**Soyuzglavmetal**  USSR Gosplan State committee for metallurgy

**Torgbank**  Commercial Bank

**TsK KPSS**  *Tsentrал’nyi Komitet Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soyuza* (Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union)

**TsSU**  Central Statistical Agency

**Ukrglavmetallosnabsbyt**  Ukrainian main administration for supplies and sales of metal production

**Ukrglavsnabsbyt(y)**  Ukrainian main administration(s) for supplies and sales

**Ukrsovnarkhoz**  Ukrainian Republican Council of the national economy

**Ukrstatupravlenie**  Ukrainian statistical agency

**VSNKh**  Supreme Council of the National Economy

**VTsSPS**  All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions

Archives

**GARF**  State Archive of the Russian Federation (*Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii*), Moscow

**RGAE**  Russian State Economic Archive

**RGANI**  Russian State Archive of Recent History (*Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii*), Moscow

**RGASPI**  Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (*Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial’no-Politicheskoi Istorii*), Moscow

**TsDAVOU**  Official abbreviation for the Central State Archive of the Highest Organs of Government and Administration of Ukraine (*Tsentrал'nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshchykh organiv vlady ta upravlinnya Ukrainy*), Kiev

**TsDAGOU**  Official abbreviation for the Central State Archive of Public Organizations of Ukraine (*Tsentrал'nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromads'kykh ob'iednan' Ukrainy*), Kiev