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The Formation of the Virgin Lands Policy

Shrouded behind a veil of semisecrecy, the making of policy decisions in the Soviet Union has been a fertile source of endless speculation and research. From time to time, happily, it becomes possible to penetrate rather deeply into the arcana of the process and turn up some illuminating materials. The decision to cultivate the virgin lands is a good case in point, and now the older Western analyses of the politics surrounding that event can be expanded substantially on the basis of information published in recent years.¹

The new materials make it possible to establish a number of important points that will, among other things, serve to correct the Khrushchevian version of how the policy was made. More particularly, it can be shown that the chief issue at stake was not the idea of turning up the virgin lands but rather the scale on which they should be cultivated. Furthermore, the opposition of the Kazakh party leadership was a major stumbling block in the early and middle stages of forming the policy, and some rather interesting methods were used to overcome that resistance. Finally, the idea of cultivating the virgin lands was not such an innovation on Khrushchev's part as has been generally thought.

The circumstances necessitating an increase in wheat production after Stalin's death need only be sketched here. At the Nineteenth Party Congress in October 1952, Malenkov treated his audience to two pleasant surprises in claiming that since eight billion poods of grain were harvested that year, the perennial grain shortage had been overcome once and for all. But not even a year later, in his August 8, 1953, speech to the Supreme Soviet, Malenkov had to confront the unpleasant reality that the level of grain production was insufficient to meet the growing demand. He therefore proposed a series of measures calculated to raise output by intensifying production on existing farms.

Shortly thereafter, Khrushchev put forth his own program for resolving the problem in his keynote speech at the epochal September 1953 plenum of the Central Committee. He favored adopting all the measures mentioned earlier by Malenkov, but suggested also that "extensive possibilities" existed

1. For those analyses see Robert Conquest, *Power and Policy in the USSR* (New York, 1961), pp. 234-43; Roger Pethybridge, *A Key to Soviet Politics: The Crisis of the Anti-Party Group* (New York, 1962), pp. 50-52; Sidney I. Ploss, *Conflict and Decision-Making in Soviet Russia* (Princeton, 1965), pp. 82-83.

for growing wheat in various regions hitherto little used for that purpose. The suggestion was incorporated in the plenum's resolution, which enumerated the general areas (later collectively to be called the virgin lands) where grain production was to be expanded—the right bank of the Volga, the northern Caucasus, Kazakhstan, and western Siberia.

The next obvious questions were precisely how to expand production and to what extent. In attempting to explain how the answers were arrived at, Khrushchev once claimed that sometime after the September plenum the *obkom* secretaries of Kazakhstan were called together in Moscow and asked those very questions: "And they stated with one voice: 'The virgin lands must be turned up. They are very fertile and will yield a great deal of grain.' At first they shyly spoke of three million hectares; they then began talking about seven, and they finally pulled it up to thirteen million."² The Kazakh *obkom* secretaries were in this authoritative fashion credited with originating the idea of cultivating the virgin lands.

Actually, the answers were not obtained in quite that way. While the plenum was in session (September 3–7) Khrushchev met in his office with various party officials from the northern oblasts of Kazakhstan, broached the idea of cultivating the virgin lands, and allegedly received an enthusiastic response from his interlocutors.³ Apparently the agreement was in principle only, since there is no indication that specific acreages were mentioned. Nevertheless, the agreement helped to provide a basis for Khrushchev to win the plenum's formal endorsement of the general idea of expanding wheat production in Kazakhstan as well as in other places.

On the day after the plenum ended, the entire Kazakh delegation met with Khrushchev and was "insistently advised" by him to work out plans for bringing the virgin lands into use.⁴ Another meeting took place shortly thereafter, this time with only the members of the Kazakh Central Committee's bureau and the *obkom* secretaries present. Addressing that more select group, Khrushchev gave "instructions" (and not merely advice) to prepare a plan for turning up new lands. In the ensuing three months various officials from Kazakhstan were called to Moscow by the Secretariat to participate in drafting

2. Nikita Khrushchev, *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma v SSSR i razvitie sel'skogo khoziaistva*, 8 vols. (Moscow, 1962–64), 2: 252–53. Khrushchev's statement was made in a speech delivered in Kazakhstan in 1956, but this passage was deleted in the version published at the time. Cf. *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, July 31, 1956.

3. *Pravda*, Nov. 17, 1960, Shevchenko's article. The question of where Khrushchev got the idea to plow the virgin lands therefore seemingly remains unanswered. But more on this matter later.

4. *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, Jan. 20, 1963, N. Dyshlovoi. See M. Baranov and V. Skorobogatov, eds., *Gody velikikh svershenii* (Alma-Ata, 1960), pp. 209–11, for a detailed account of the meeting at which representatives of the USSR Ministry of Agriculture were also present.

the plan, but the members of the bureau were not among those summoned.⁵ It was only at these later meetings that a projected total area to be cultivated was determined.

At this stage in the planning, the question of how much land to turn up was problematical, largely because it had at first been assumed by all concerned that the Kazakhs would do the job on the basis of their own rather limited resources. But at some one of the later meetings Khrushchev conferred with the Kazakh *obkom* secretaries, asking them: "What quantity of land would it be possible to cultivate in the republic if the project were given a nationwide scope?"⁶ Undoubtedly, it was in response to this question that the *obkom* secretaries suggested the figures that Khrushchev gave in the quotation above. The First Secretary was now able to insist upon cultivating millions of hectares of new lands in Kazakhstan. This series of encounters illustrates well how Khrushchev intervened in Kazakh party affairs to initiate policy as well as to put pressure upon the Kazakhs to expand the scope of that policy once it had been accepted in principle.

The Kazakh leadership's first response to the enactments of the September plenum was published in the October 6, 1953, resolution of the Kazakh Central Committee's sixth plenum which called for an increase in the area sown to hard (winter) wheat in the republic.⁷ In effect, that statement was but a repetition of the terms used in the September plenum's resolution, and neither the specific hectarage to be turned up nor the virgin lands were mentioned. *Pravda's* report on the Kazakh plenum did, however, note that a number of speakers had called attention to the fact that in recent years the cultivation of virgin and idle lands in Kazakhstan had ceased.⁸ Pressure from below was already being put upon the Kazakh party leadership to make amends for that negligence.

It was only in the confidential report, dated December 3, 1953, from the Kazakh Central Committee to its superior counterpart in Moscow that the first specific figure on hectarage to be cultivated appeared; the report stated that by 1955 the area sown to wheat would increase by 544,000 hectares.⁹ That relatively modest proposal had been worked out at another plenum of the Kazakh Central Committee held in late November, at which the main objections of the Kazakh opponents to Khrushchev's proposals were raised.

5. S. Baishev et al., eds., *Ocherki istorii Kommunisticheskoi partii Kazakhstana* (Alma-Ata, 1963), pp. 497-98. The authors of this book, the official history of the Kazakh party, took some pains to cite party archives in making the point that instructions were given. It did, after all, contradict Khrushchev's version.

6. V. I. Poliakov, *Serdechnye vstrechi* (Moscow, 1959), p. 5.

7. V. K. Savosko, ed., *Narodnoe dvizhenie za osvoinie tselinnykh zemel' v Kazakhstane* (Moscow, 1959), p. 33.

8. *Pravda*, Oct. 10, 1953.

9. Savosko, *Narodnoe dvizhenie*, p. 53.

They insisted that roads, warehouses, and grain elevators should be built before colossal areas of land were brought under cultivation.¹⁰ Acceptance of those demands would necessarily have meant that the pace of cultivation would be slow.

All these activities, it must be stressed, were taking place in the covertness which has ever characterized the work of the *apparat*.¹¹ But this time the secrecy and the peculiar kinds of pressures it usually permitted the First Secretary in Moscow to put on the party leadership of any republic were not producing the desired result in the form of a commitment to a sufficiently massive cultivation of new lands. Another course of action had to be undertaken in order to impose a new kind of pressure upon the so far successfully recalcitrant Kazakh party leadership. A substantial dose of publicity was therefore administered in two lengthy articles, very similar in content, that appeared in *Pravda* on December 11 and 24. Their respective authors (N. Beliaev, secretary of the Altai *kraikom* in western Siberia, and E. Taibekov, chairman of the Kazakh Council of Ministers) maintained that the krai and the republic each had about six million hectares of land suitable for raising wheat. They then noted and refuted several objections to cultivating such lands, particularly the one that cattle farming would suffer because pasture would be reduced. Finally, invoking in effect the almost sacrosanct principle of democratic centralism, they pointed out that the policy of cultivating the virgin lands flowed out of the decisions of the September plenum.

The *Pravda* articles revealed several important things: their very authorship showed that Khrushchev had the support of the Altai krai's party leader, but not that of the Kazakh party leadership, in his quest to cultivate six million hectares of new lands in each of their respective domains. Then two short but extremely important items appeared in the press. On January 6, 1954, *Komsomol'skaia pravda* printed a minuscule TASS dispatch from Kazakhstan quoting M. Vlasenko, the republic's minister of state farms. He announced that the Kazakh state farms were to plow and sow to wheat an additional 2.5 million hectares in the next two years. This was the first time that a specific figure on hectareage actually to be cultivated had been reported publicly. Similarly, on January 15 a dispatch from Alma-Ata in *Pravda* stated that the Kazakh collective farms were to cultivate "several million" hectares of virgin lands.

These items clearly indicated that the expansion of the sown area was

10. Baranov and Skorobogatov, *Gody velikikh svershenii*, p. 211.

11. It must be stressed again that the USSR Ministry of Agriculture, and not only the party apparatus, had been involved in discussions of the project immediately following the September plenum (see note 4). In December a special governmental commission was formed to deal with the virgin lands when the huge size of the endeavor began to be apparent. See *Istoriia SSSR*, 1965, no. 5, p. 142.

to be much greater than the one projected by the Kazakh Central Committee in its recent December report. What had happened in the interim? Quite simply, that report had been preceded by the November plenum of the Kazakh committee. There, more proposals for extensively cultivating the virgin lands had been raised, only to be rejected by the top Kazakh party leadership. Khrushchev's attempts to work through intermediaries having failed, and the *Pravda* articles having appeared, toward the end of December the Secretariat in Moscow summoned a number of "representatives" from Kazakhstan, discussed the virgin lands in the new context, and transmitted direct orders to Alma-Ata to undertake preparations for an expanded program of cultivation.¹²

But all the items in the press and direct orders notwithstanding, the fact was that some basic aspects of the virgin lands program had not yet been worked out in final form. On January 22, 1954, Khrushchev found it necessary to forward to the Presidium of the party a memorandum entitled "Ways of Solving the Grain Problem." He there stated his case to his fellow collective leaders in a manner showing him to be an able practitioner of the arts of political argumentation and manipulation.¹³ He began by pointing out rather bluntly that the nation's grain problem had not been solved. In fact, a kind of scissors crisis had been developing, since in recent years the amount of grain purchased by the government was progressively being overtaken by the quantity expended, and in 1953 it had been necessary to make up a difference of 160 million poods out of the state grain reserves.

Khrushchev then hastened, in an astutely politic way, to absolve Malenkov of any culpability for having issued deceptive figures at the Nineteenth Congress: the fault really lay with the local authorities, who had raised their crop estimates so as to approach the figure for the planned payment in kind. The announced 8 billion poods had been nothing but an inflated estimate; the amount actually harvested in 1952 was 5.6 billion poods.

Now came the main point. In 1954–55, said Khrushchev, it would be possible to cultivate 13 million hectares of virgin land in various parts of the Soviet Union, 8.7 million of them on collective farms, 4.3 million on state farms. At this point, it is important to establish quite clearly that the only arresting element in Khrushchev's proposal was the *scope* of the endeavor, and not the idea of turning up virgin lands. After all, there was already in progress a more modest program for cultivating 2.3 million hectares of new

12. See *ibid.*, and also *Pravda's* report (Feb. 22, 1954) dealing with the Kazakh party congress.

13. See Khrushchev, *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma*, 1:85–100, for the complete text. Appended to the memorandum, but not published with it, were various supporting documents, including newspaper articles on the subject.

lands in 1954 as part of the current Five-Year Plan.¹⁴ If we assume, in the absence of other data, that the Five-Year Plan called for cultivation of an additional 2.3 million hectares in 1955, Khrushchev's proposal amounted to adding another 8.4 million hectares over the course of the two years. The relative roles assigned to the collective and state farms seemed both to underline that continuity and to guarantee that capital investment expenditures would not be astronomical. Apparently Khrushchev had seized upon an existing program and was suggesting a radical expansion of it.

After discussing the benefits and the imposing problems associated with the proposed program, Khrushchev argued that the additional grain from the new lands would make it possible to ease the pressure on the collective farms as a whole, since the authorities would then be able to "change the existing incorrect practice of grain purchases in which the per hectare norms of compulsory deliveries exist only nominally, but in fact as much grain as can be gotten is taken from the collective farms."¹⁵ It is not too difficult to imagine how irresistibly enticing this prospect of eliminating one of the most counter-productive practices in Soviet agriculture must have been.

Now that the question was in the hands of the Presidium, Khrushchev next undertook the task of gaining support for his full program from the Soviet agricultural interests by attempting to influence the course of the debates among the leaders. How fortunate (or designed?), therefore, that four major conferences on agriculture took place almost consecutively in Moscow in late January and early February. First, the scientists and production workers who attended a meeting sponsored by the All-Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences "recognized the exceptional advantageousness of the cultivation of new lands on an extensive scale."¹⁶ However, that meeting and its endorsement received far less publicity than the subsequent conference of MTS workers.

Both *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* reported the proceedings (January 25–28) in great detail. Although three of the lesser speakers were quoted as remarking that preparations were being made to cultivate new lands, the lengthy summary of the keynote address delivered by I. A. Benediktov, USSR minister

14. Khrushchev cited that figure in the memorandum when making his main point. See *ibid.*, 1: 89. Even that more limited program was apparently lagging. See *Direktivny KPSS i Sovetskogo pravitel'stva po khoziaistvennym voprosam, 1917–1957 gg.: Sbornik dokumentov*, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1957–58), 4: 167. In many respects, Khrushchev's proposals in the memorandum bore a remarkable resemblance to two previous virgin lands programs undertaken in 1940 and 1946. See *Resheniia partii i pravitel'stva po khoziaistvennym voprosam* (Moscow, 1967–68), 2: 749–52; see also *Direktivny*, 3: 135–45.

15. Khrushchev, *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma*, 1: 96.

16. *Voprosy istorii*, 1962, no. 8, p. 6. See also *Pravda*, Jan. 25, 1954. The use of the word "extensive" at this stage had a significance that will be commented upon later.

of agriculture, contained not a word about the virgin lands. A speech was also delivered by Khrushchev, but not even a summary of that was published. It is therefore somewhat curious to find a *Pravda* editorial on the conference devoting considerable attention to the news that “the state and collective farms are to undertake extensively the cultivation of virgin and idle lands.”¹⁷ The same can be said of the appeal published by the conference which, using heavy type to accentuate the point, called the virgin lands “a huge reserve for increasing the production of grain.”¹⁸

Not surprisingly, the inspiration for those statements was to be found in the speeches of Benediktov, later printed in full by *Pravda* on February 11, 1954, and Khrushchev, made public only in 1962.¹⁹ Benediktov’s speech revealed the precise hectarage to be turned up by the collective farms, while Khrushchev’s disclosed the total area to be cultivated—13 million hectares. Yet neither figure was made public at the time of the conference, and only such indefinite expressions as “extensively” and “huge reserve” appeared in print.

Strikingly similar circumstances characterized the third meeting, the All-Union Conference of State Farm Workers, held on February 3–5. Once more, little was reported as having been said about the virgin lands, and Khrushchev again spoke, but no report was made of his specific remarks. This time, though, there was a significant departure. The conference’s appeal published by *Pravda* on February 8 noted (again in heavy type): “In 1954 the state farms must plow up not less than 4.3 million hectares of virgin and idle lands. . . .” The figure, obviously, was taken from Khrushchev’s memorandum.

This turn of events was important, for only at this point could one be certain that the leadership had reached a decision to accept that part of the memorandum dealing with the role to be played by the state farms. Apparently no decision had yet been made regarding the collective farms, which were to bear the brunt of the work according to the memorandum; but that was forthcoming in short order, as was made clear by the publication of Benediktov’s speech on February 11.

The details of the fourth meeting, the All-Russian Conference of Advanced Agricultural Workers, held on February 11–15, may be omitted, since the landmark decisions just noted had been made, and this conference played no important political role.

On the other hand, there was some unfinished business to be attended to, namely, the still obstructive Kazakh party leadership. Here, too, Khrushchev’s

17. *Pravda*, Jan. 29, 1954.

18. *Ibid.*, Jan. 30, 1954.

19. Khrushchev, *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma*, 1: 101–33.

efforts were crowned with success. On January 30, 1954, the members of the Kazakh Central Committee's bureau attended a meeting of the Secretariat in Moscow, at which their behavior was criticized. The first and second secretaries were then and there deposed, a decision formalized by the Kazakh Central Committee about a week later.²⁰

Casting a glance backward, we may observe that the events connected with the conferences on agriculture suggest that between January 25 and February 8 (the interval between the delivery of Benediktov's speech and the publication of the appeal of the Conference of State Farm Workers) an argument was taking place among the leaders in Moscow about the feasibility of carrying out Khrushchev's full program. Consequently, no specific figures on the matter could be made public in the meantime.

The evidence concerning the opposition to that program in the party's Presidium unfortunately constitutes a rather weak foundation upon which to base a satisfactory analysis. Since the accusations lodged against the opponents were made public only several years later, it is not always clear just when each opponent voiced his objections. Those who expressed serious reservations when the memorandum was being discussed were Molotov, Kaganovich, and perhaps Saburov.²¹ Malenkov's opposition was minimal.²² At least while Khrushchev was in power, it was virtually standard Soviet practice to accuse the entire "antiparty group" of being against cultivating the virgin lands. In all likelihood, the opposition of the remaining members of the group arose only later in the form of interfering with the execution of the policy once its high cost had become apparent: Khrushchev himself indicated that they joined the group only afterward as a result of disagreements over a number of issues, one of which was the virgin lands policy.²³ By that time, it is worth noting,

20. See *Istoriia SSSR*, 1965, no. 5, p. 142; Khrushchev, *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma*, 1: 275-76; *Pravda*, Feb. 12, 1954.

21. On Molotov, see *Plenum Tsentral'nogo Komiteta Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuz, 15-19 dekabria 1958 g.: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1959), pp. 15-16, for Khrushchev on this point; D. Poliansky provides confirmation in *XXII S'ezd Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuz, 17-31 oktiabria 1961 g.: Stenograficheskii otchet*, 3 vols. (Moscow, 1962), 2: 42. On Kaganovich, see *Plenum*, p. 408, for Iurkin's statement and pp. 421-22 for Matskevich's substantiation. On Saburov, see *Plenum*, p. 408. Iurkin here refers to objections raised by the State Planning Commission, then headed by Saburov, that the material resources needed to carry out the program were lacking.

22. The only mention of Malenkov's having entered a specific objection *at this time* came in Bulganin's impassioned speech to the Central Committee in 1958. See *Plenum*, p. 340. One hesitates to take this statement at face value, partly because Bulganin is the only one to have made the accusation and partly because he refers here not only to the virgin lands policy but also to the proposal made by Khrushchev almost simultaneously to change the method of planning in agriculture. It is therefore not clear just which policy (if not both) Malenkov was allegedly objecting to.

23. See *XXII S'ezd*, 1: 105-6.

both the shape and scope of the program had been altered radically; thus the issues involved in later debates were not at all the same as the ones in January–February 1954.

The question of timing is not without importance in discussing the opposition. It is somewhat surprising that Khrushchev's memorandum was submitted so late, that is, so short a time before the beginning of the spring plowing. Possibly he was waiting for the final agricultural statistics for 1953 to arrive, thinking that they would buttress his point about the seriousness of the situation. But since spring was just around the corner, preparations had to be initiated and pressure put on the Presidium to get a quick answer. In that connection it would be interesting to know exactly at whose suggestion the four meetings on agriculture were called and when it was decided to convoke them. The fact that in one of his unpublished speeches delivered on January 28, a scant six days after he had completed his memorandum, Khrushchev was able to announce that a plenum was to be held shortly indicated at least that the leadership was in agreement on the need to expand the area sown to grain.²⁴ But since no figures on the total area to be cultivated were published at that time, there is no reason to think that all were of one mind at the moment regarding the scope of the expansion, not to mention its precise form.

The objections entered against cultivating the virgin lands were the following: the land there was not suitable for tilling; because of poor harvests, there would in fact be a drop in the per hectare yield of grain, and therefore the expenditures made would not be recovered; there were not enough resources, fiscal or material, to carry out the program.²⁵ Although the precise part played by the conferences discussed above in overcoming these objections remains obscure, it is at least clear that Khrushchev's statements at them served to provoke expressions of support (the appeal and editorial cited previously) which would not be without significance in the discussions then taking place in the Presidium. The outcome of the debate in that body was documented in the resolution produced by the Central Committee plenum of February 23–March 2, 1954—the adoption of Khrushchev's program.

So ended the long and complex process by which Khrushchev overcame the opposition to his proposals which had arisen in both Kazakhstan and Moscow. Khrushchev first tried to eliminate the Kazakhstan opposition by attempting to work from below, largely through the *obkom* secretaries, who had in effect received instructions from the Secretariat in Moscow, if not from

24. Khrushchev, *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma*, 1: 139.

25. Iurkin in *Plenum*, p. 408. Iurkin here couples his enumeration of the objections with the insinuation that they were actually groundless and were raised merely for base reasons. While ill will may have played a part, the future would show that the objections had some basis in fact.

Khrushchev himself. When that tack proved unworkable, the Kazakh leadership was eventually removed. Khrushchev surmounted the Moscow opposition by seeking support outside both the party and governmental agencies in his speeches to the conferences of agricultural workers as well as to the scientists engaged in agricultural research.

The key term used in the esoteric public communications dealing with the virgin lands was “extensive.” All along the way, the main objections to Khrushchev’s policy had to do with how much land ought to be, or could be, turned up in 1954–55. Khrushchev took a maximalist position, in fine opting for the cultivation of an enormous area roughly equal in size to Greece or the state of Alabama. Thus, to favor the “extensive” cultivation of the new lands, as the first two conferences on agriculture did, was to support Khrushchev’s proposal and declare oneself against the proponents of a more limited undertaking, a category into which Kaganovich and Saburov seemed to have fallen. With the possible exception of Molotov, there is simply no evidence showing that anybody, in either Moscow or Kazakhstan, was opposed in principle to expanding the cultivation of the virgin lands.²⁶ But many were dubious about the wisdom of attempting to do too much in too short a time.

Once the program got under way, Khrushchev was quick to press for doubling the area to be cultivated, a proposal that occasioned even more widespread opposition among the leadership. Although that entanglement is quite another matter, it ought at least to be stated that there, too, Khrushchev carried the day.

The preceding analysis points toward some complexities in the Soviet policy formation and decision-making process that require further comment. The process in this case did not simply consist in an order given by Khrushchev which was immediately followed to the letter by the lower instances of party authority. Nor was it exclusively a matter of the disagreement among Presidium members. In broadest outline, the period under study was bracketed by two major decisions reached formally at Central Committee plenums: the general authorization in September 1953 to expand wheat production, and the specific elaboration in the following March. During that time a large number of issues arose and had to be resolved, alternative choices were made, a variety of institutions and politicians holding posts in them came into play, and varied communication techniques were used.

In view of the past adoption of virgin lands programs, it was not surprising that Khrushchev should have conceived of a new program before the September plenum, and neither was it surprising that the idea was so easily accepted in principle at the time of the plenum. What happened immediately

26. On Molotov, see Conquest, *Power and Policy*, pp. 234–43, where copious quotations assist in establishing the specific objections entered by the various opponents.

thereafter was of great importance. The Kazakhs were told to produce a proposal based upon an estimate of their own capacities. Already a choice had been made involving a tacit avowal that nationwide resources would not be committed, an obvious effort to keep expenditures down; and that was probably the main reason the program had been accepted in principle. But the Kazakhs were apparently given no other guidelines, at least partly because nobody in Moscow had a clear idea of how much could be accomplished on that basis. At the same moment, the USSR Ministry of Agriculture entered the picture, almost at the very beginning, and the Secretariat in Moscow thereafter kept a close check on developments by ordering various Kazakhs to the capital.

Only in late November did the Kazakhs develop their concrete program, almost three months after the September plenum, and it was probably about then that Khrushchev raised the question of broadening the resource base of the program with the Kazakh *obkom* secretaries. The objections raised in the major virgin lands regions to that policy alternative were serious enough to require public refutation in the December *Pravda* articles, which at the same time constituted weighty support for Khrushchev's desire to expand cultivation extensively.²⁷ The basic outline of Khrushchev's final proposal was therefore fashioned in the following month and presented in his memorandum. Yet he was still uncertain of success. To be sure, a virgin lands policy was to be announced at the approaching plenum; but with respect to Kazakhstan, say, would it call for cultivating half a million, two million, or six million hectares? To ensure that the area would be as large as possible, Khrushchev sought additional support at the meetings dealing with agriculture even while the final decision was being made, the crucial point in the whole process.²⁸

By the time the February–March plenum had gathered, an imposing array of institutions, persons, and groups had in some way expressed varying opinions on the policy under consideration. Just to enumerate them suggests the complexity of the political forces involved: Khrushchev, the September plenum, the Kazakh delegation to the plenum, the Kazakh bureau, the Kazakh first and second secretaries, the Secretariat in Moscow, the Kazakh *obkom*

27. These articles were doubtless among those appended to Khrushchev's memorandum (see note 13).

28. The last three conferences were formally convoked by the joint decision of the Central Committee and the Council of Ministers, a fact of some importance inasmuch as, according to Khrushchev, the same two bodies also decided to convoke the plenum of February–March. See Khrushchev, *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma*, 1: 133. To put the matter quite accurately, the meetings were convoked jointly by the Presidium, the Secretariat, and the Council of Ministers. The surprising element, nevertheless, was that the Council of Ministers had been involved in calling a plenum. As for the last three agricultural conferences, the Presidium attended at least the opening session of each, and it seems safe to assume that the Presidium or some of its members held private meetings with delegates at which the virgin lands were discussed.

secretaries, the USSR Ministry of Agriculture, the Altai *kraikom*'s first secretary, the chairman of the Kazakh Council of Ministers, the interests represented at the successive conferences on agriculture, the members of the Presidium. While the totality of these factors at work in the political process outlined above did not constitute an example of democracy at work, neither was it quite totalitarianism at work. Rather, it was an illustration of the "establishment" engaging in the new brand of politics made possible by the recent demise of the Leader. There was much more involved in policy-making than just the decision of a dozen men.

To be sure, the final decision was made by that handful of men, but only after considerable staff work had been done. And it was in connection with the latter activity that much of the real politics of the February–March plenum took place regarding the new lands. Prior to the plenum an extended discussion had already taken place in which the speakers at the session had either participated or with which they were at least familiar. As Western students of Soviet affairs are wont to note, the speeches at plenums often appear to be *pro forma* performances. Indeed, they are largely that, but a study of what precedes them takes one beyond the pale of pat addresses and into the realm of rough-and-tumble politics.