There is hardly a person in Russia not familiar with the name Uryupinsk. Invariably, it is uttered with a contemptuous sneer and even sounds somewhat indecent in Russian. Uryupinsk became the embodiment of what Soviet Marxist ideology with its strong anti-peasant thrust branded as the “idiocy of rural life.” At first sight, Uryupinsk, a small town lost amidst the flat grain fields, is a sleepy hollow that has grown torpid from boredom. In summer, all is sultry and downcast in a dull feather grass steppe, once in a while crossed by a chain of low hills, much like Chekhov’s description of the rural scene: “A kite-bird glides right over the surface, smoothly flapping its wings and suddenly stops in midair, as if struck with the thought of how boring life is.” Much akin to their crops, the locals seem to spend their lives locked into unchanging seasonal cycles.

Yet the air of slumber is deceptive. At harvest time the place awakens to frenetic activity, as what was called in sovietspeak “the battle for the harvest” began, and the national media touted the best workers in places like Uryupinsk as heroes of bread harvesting campaigns. These annual fenzies were actually a modern twist on the real battles that Cossacks fought here against Russia’s nomadic neighbors. Uryupinsk once was a district headquarters of the Cossack armies and was also widely known for its vibrant district fairs. In modern times, both the unique militarized lifestyle of the Don River Cossacks and this lively commercial activity are reviving, underlining again the traditional ambiguity of a region sleeping with a ready eye open.

The landscapes of the flat plains in the center of the United States have always generated strong opposing judgments. Hamlin Garland, raised in South Dakota in the late 19th century, expressed one view: “How poor and dull and squalid it seemed! The one main street ended at the hillside at his left and stretched away to the north between two rows of the usual village stores, unrelieved by a tree or a touch of beauty.”

But others see different textures in the landscape. From any small knoll in central Iowa, for example, you can gaze out in all directions at rectangles of green and yellow. Different shades of green dominate. Taller stalks of corn undulate in the breeze, while the deeper green of the soybean bushes couch lower and are more still. In contrast with the corduroy texture of the row crops, scattered fields of golden wheat sway in the gentle wind like a finely woven sheet.

To some people such a summer scene of the rural Breadbasket makes it the most boring place in America, but these landscapes have their own beauty, and their placidity is deceptive. As the late summer turns into autumn, the landscape changes abruptly. Large combines strip first the wheat and then the soybean and corn fields. Trucks of all sizes pulse along the roadways, carrying many of the kernels and beans to silver, cone topped storage bins beside the area’s farmsteads. Other truckloads will unload their cargoes at the massive, cylindrical concrete grain elevators that loom over every village and town in the region. Like the crops around whose planting and harvest the region’s economy revolves, the rhythms of the American Breadbasket are geared to the seasons. Despite long periods with little apparent activity in summer and winter, the fields of the Breadbasket provide enormous yields that help keep Americans well nourished and supplement the diets of millions of people in other parts of the globe.
RUSSIA'S FERTILE TRIANGLE

The Breadbasket region is first and foremost Russia’s granary. The majority of people actually live in cities and work outside agriculture, but the popular and not so misleading image of the region is sharply brought into focus during harvesting campaigns, when newspapers are crowded with photographs of the campaign heroes, the best harvester operators set against the backdrop of mountains of threshed grain. Like their Egyptian counterparts, these pyramids of grain convey a somewhat sacral image, and were part of the official myth of the happy socialist village, while the major product of the Breadbasket, wheat, is something of a national cultural symbol.

The harsh conditions of Russian regions limited staple grains to the coarser varieties, such as rye or barley, and wheat bread became a lingering symbol of bounty and well-being. Honored guests are still greeted with the present of a ceremonial loaf, and Russians eat far more bread than any western nation. Russian language abounds with sayings like “Bread is master of everything,” and to the extent that such sayings are true, the Breadbasket is the master of the country.

In most of Russia, climate makes agriculture akin to Russian roulette, rather than an orderly activity with predictable outcomes. But the Breadbasket was and is a region with a stable output of surplus grain and other products, which makes it vitally important for feeding the mostly urban nation. The region became Russia’s cornucopia thanks to its black soils, the chernozems, named for the thickness of the black organic layer that accounts for their proverbial fertility. According to a common saying, it is enough to stick a broomstick into the soil for something good to grow out of it. During the Paris International Fair of 1900 a sample of Russian chernozem was dubbed as the world standard of soil fertility.

AMERICA'S FERTILE TRIANGLE

Since the 1840s, when immigrants from eastern and southern states and from Europe started settling the region in large numbers, the Breadbasket has been a region focused on agriculture. Few parts of the world produce as much food, and while the number of people who live and work on farms has steadily declined during this century, the ebb and flow of the farm calendar still regulate the rhythms of the region, just as the fortunes and failures of the agricultural economy establish the roller coaster on which many other establishments ride. Agriculture remains the backbone of economic activity, and farms dominate rural landscapes.

The Breadbasket’s agricultural bounty results from the lavidness of nature. Nowhere else in the world is there such a large region with an ideal combination of fertile black soils, a sufficiently warm and moist climate, and flat terrain. When Vermont native Robert Frost saw the prairie soils, he reportedly remarked that they could be eaten without the bother of conversion into plants. Because of the region’s interior location, the temperatures are continental, with daily averages differing by more than 70 degrees F (40 degrees C) between winter and summer. Annual average precipitation is quite adequate (from 20 to 40 inches), but often streaky. Periods of drought or heavy rains often last for months or even years. Droughts rarely extend throughout the region, however. The large area of the Breadbasket relative to the fluctuating pressure systems and jet streams ensures that abundant yields in some parts more than offset diminished harvests in others. The region therefore is always a major exporter of food products.

The triangular shape of the modern Breadbasket is remarkably similar to the area east of the 100th meridian that two centuries ago was dominated by grasses. The region’s eastern point thrusts into central Indiana and the Heartland region. In his sweeping study of the places and characteristics associated with the term “the Middle West,” geographer James R. Shortridge observed that all Midwestern states historically were
The natural vegetation of the Breadbasket is that of the steppe, the Russian grasslands. Over millennia, the decaying stems and massive roots of tall grasses enriched the organic content of the soil, while the flatness of the steppes allowed for orderly landscapes of huge rectangular fields. On this flat and monotonous plain, the boundaries of the region (which fittingly enough resembles a ploughshare in outline) are a classic expression of the relationship between human activity and a precarious physical environment. Farming is a risky business in the steppe belt, where average yearly rains from 12 to 20 inches are not generous. The harvest can be scuttled not so much by a dry year but by the unpredictability of the climate itself. Despite these ups and downs, the Breadbasket performed a crucial food supply function, located between the better-watered farmland of the South and a region where soils become too dry to support farming without irrigation. The Breadbasket provided a wedge between cultures as well, since this drier land on its southeast flank was home to populations of Asiatic ancestry.

Today the Breadbasket is a bucolic landscape of European-style farming, but in the past the whole region was the scene of prolonged fighting between the worlds of the sedentary European farmer and the Asian nomad. Gained by Russians only in the closing years of the 18th century, the Breadbasket became the symbolic middle between the developed and tamed Slav/European part of the country and its unruly Asiatic periphery.

The Cossack Range to the Granary

Just as the region's climate alternates devastating droughts with good years, so its history is a seesaw between the farmer and the cattleman. The steppes were fleetingly dominated by such diverse and more sedentary peoples as Christianized Germanic Goths, the Khazarian Jews from the Lower Volga, Kievan Slavs, and Muslim Bulgars, but it was the nomad who always regained the upper hand. The northern boundary of the region is laid down not only by nature, but also by history, as Russian expansion associated with the pastoral image. But as manufacturing became preeminent in the urban centers of the eastern Middle West, that region emerged as a not-so-bucolic industrial Heartland. In terms of culture, the Breadbasket is part of Midwest and a continuation of Heartland, but differs in its agricultural profile. The Breadbasket's western boundary is similarly defined by the growing importance to the west of non-agricultural activities and landuse. As Joel Garreau stated, the boundary follows the line "where carbohydrates become more important than hydrocarbons." The "middle" in the name Middle West when applied to the Breadbasket today designates not only a geographic position but also a symbolic median between the industrialized East and the more natural West.

From Buffalo Range to the Granary

Today the landscapes of the Breadbasket are as tame as those found in any American region. Yet only 150 years ago these lands were a nomadic range. Confrontations between alternative possible uses of this environment, between farmer and rancher, settler and nomad, were an important part of the region's history and help define its western boundary.

In the early 1800s, when future President James Monroe asserted that the territory of Illinois was a flat plain unadorned by a single tree and so barren that it would never attract enough population to form a state, he was wrong about both the future and the past. Even before Europeans arrived, the indigenous people had long been reshaping the natural landscape of the region. For example, the climate is suited to broadleaf deciduous forests, but the emergence of natural grasses as the dominant vegetation (with forests limited to river valleys) was fostered by frequent fires ignited by Native Americans to aid their hunting. Tribes like the Dakota were edged into the region from the east by the struggles between the French and English around the Great Lakes. Forced out of the woodlands that nourished them for centuries, these tribes accepted
Many people think of the Cossack as quintessentially Russian, but Cossacks (from the Turkic word for “adventurer”) would pointedly draw a line between themselves and other Russians. The beginnings of the Cossack story may be traced to the Tatar warbands of the steppe, expert horsemen who lived by the plunder of adjacent states or mercenary service, and Cossacks include both Slavic and Tatar blood. Only in the 16th century did the Slavic element finally predominate among the Zaporozhian Cossacks of Ukraine and the Don Cossacks of Russia when a swelling flow of fugitives - and as Robin Hoods for the common people, they also were self-serving anarchists who saw themselves as independent people superior to Russian farmers, whom they called "muzhiaks" (peasants) and despised as obsequious. The subjugation of the Cossacks to the Russian crown was a drawn out stick-and-carrot process of converting them from plundering bandits to mercenary service, and Cossacks include both Slavic and Tatar blood. Only in the 18th century did the Slavic element finally predominate among the Zaporozhian Cossacks of Ukraine and the Don Cossacks of Russia when a swelling flow of fugitives and as Robin Hoods for the common people, they also were self-serving anarchists who plundered Russian villages without qualm up until the 17th century.

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The expansion of settlement onto the Great Plains after the Civil War did not proceed as smoothly, however. The horses that made tribes like the Dakota, Comanche, Cheyenne, and Arapaho skilled hunters also permitted them to be mobile warriors. The buffalo that roamed the prairies by the hundreds of thousands provided the chief source of sustenance for these peoples. But they also saw themselves as independent people superior to Russian farmers, whom they called "muzhiaks" (peasants) and despised as obsequious. The subjugation of the Cossacks to the Russian crown was a drawn out stick-and-carrot process of converting them from plundering bandits to mercenary service, and Cossacks include both Slavic and Tatar blood. Only in the 18th century did the Slavic element finally predominate among the Zaporozhian Cossacks of Ukraine and the Don Cossacks of Russia when a swelling flow of fugitives and as Robin Hoods for the common people, they also were self-serving anarchists who plundered Russian villages without qualm up until the 17th century.

Once the Russian monarchy drew the Cossacks to its side, they mutated into the elite corps of Russian army. The entire male Cossack population lived in military status as a permanent standing reserve for the army, but in exchange it was awarded with many privileges. Thus the lands of the largest group, the Don Cossack Host, received a special administrative status with a wide internal autonomy, and ownership of land within the horsethe horses that were the unintended gifts of early Spanish colonists in the southwest, and became expert mounted hunters. The buffalo that roamed the prairies by the millions became their primary source of sustenance, and nomadic tribes scattered themselves across the grasslands west of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers.

Just as human beings altered natural conditions, the region's environment required major adjustments from the people who entered it. White settlers who entered eastern parts of the region in the first half of the 19th century saw its opportunities and challenges differently from Native Americans and ushered in a new stage of transformation. Many people think of the Cossack as quintessentially Russian, but Cossacks (from the Turkic word for “adventurer”) would pointedly draw a line between themselves and other Russians. The beginnings of the Cossack story may be traced to the Tatar warbands of the steppe, expert horsemen who lived by the plunder of adjacent states or mercenary service, and Cossacks include both Slavic and Tatar blood. Only in the 16th century did the Slavic element finally predominate among the Zaporozhian Cossacks of Ukraine and the Don Cossacks of Russia when a swelling flow of fugitives and as Robin Hoods for the common people, they also were self-serving anarchists who plundered Russian villages without qualm up until the 17th century.

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territory was denied to non-Cossacks. To preserve their warlike character, Cossacks were even once prohibited to farm, but as the frontier bypassed them many were forced into agriculture. With liberal land allotments and no landlords, Cossack farming thrived. After the 1860s when imperial boundaries moved beyond the Caucasus and into Central Asia, agriculture in the region decisively gained the upper hand. With the influx of non-Cossack settlers released by the Emancipation, the virgin lands were rapidly transformed into an area of large-scale grain farming. But as the region acquired purely Slav character, its southern boundary became a sharp divide between the world of the Slav farmer and that of the Asiatic cattle rancher. A step south from the Breadbasket, Russian speech is drowned in the sea of Caucasian or Turkic languages. In Eurasia, East and West are divided along a latitude, not a longitude, line.

With European occupation of the Breadbasket the steppe frontier was not yet closed; our region does not include all of the steppe granary, as the chernozem belt continues beyond the Urals into the Virgin Lands of northern Kazakhstan. That area was opened to European settlement only in 1889, when a flood of homesteaders was brought by the Transiberian railroad. The decisive supremacy of farming and people of European stock arrived only in the 1950s during the Virgin Lands campaign, when the area was transformed into a spring wheat belt. Cossacks played little role in opening up this eastern wing of the steppe belt, but that’s not the only reason for excluding it from our region. Although impressive in terms of output, grain farming in this area is extensive. Siberia-like winters and dry desert winds make it less predictable than anywhere else. The taming of the one-time range only seems to be complete.

Despite Turner’s assertion, struggles between the range and the field never ended along the western margin of the Breadbasket. In reality, the boundary is a line but rather a brushstroke on coarse paper that follows the whims of the climate with its dramatic periodic fluctuations in precipitation. As an approximation, the boundary can be drawn at roughly the 100th meridian, with farms predominating to the east and ranches to the west. Although grain farming occurs well to the west of this meridian, including much of the northern wheat belt in Dakotas and Montana and part of the southern wheat belt in Kansas and Texas, its extensive and largely marginal nature disqualifies those areas from inclusion in the Breadbasket. The fragility of farming there may be seen in the history of the Dust Bowl which effectively ended local farming in the 1930s. It has since revived only with heavy reliance on groundwater from the Ogallala aquifer. The rapid development of the aquifer after the Second World War pulled the winter wheat belt far to the south and west, but this water-induced expansion is strictly temporary. The rapid depletion of the Ogallala aquifer will eventually bring back the cattle. Thus the exclusion of areas west of the 100th meridian is true to the principle of defining our regions as entities with longer life spans, which means unearthing deeper boundaries that may be hidden beneath the “dust” of fleeting change.
THEME 1: AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPES OF THE GRANARIES

The Mosaic of Fields

With their bold step into the unfamiliar grassland environments of the Eurasian steppes (simultaneous with penetration into the American prairies and pampas), Europeans claimed the few large areas of the world ideally suited for mechanized farming. The whole landscape of the region is dominated by huge geometrically laid-out fields. The Breadbasket leads the former USSR in the per capita extent of arable land, and the proportion of lands under plow reaches 80 to 90 percent. In the USSR the Breadbasket accounted for about a half of all grain production, as well as a major meat industry.

The Breadbasket was the land of exemplary socialist agriculture, touted as a model of the efficiency possible in kolkhozes (collective farms arranged as cooperatives) and sovkhozes (Soviet farms run by the state). This was probably the only region where the economy of scale allowed by collectivized agriculture outweighed the inherent inefficiencies of the non-market agricultural economy. The development of the Sal steppes of Stavropol’s territory in the 1930’s provides a good example. The government created Socialist farms in the place of scattered homesteads and established centralized farm machinery stations for optimal use throughout a large area. Plowing and irrigation of virgin lands was undertaken on a large scale, as on the appropriately named sovkhoz “Giant” which incorporated 125,000 acres.

In terms of grain harvests per acre the Russian Breadbasket was quite on par with its American sibling. Even such a generic illness of Soviet agriculture as the loss of harvested produce due to inadequate transport, storage and processing, was far less acute here. The region pioneered the Soviet version of integrated agribusiness where farms formed joint concerns with processing and storage operators and even obtained their own wholesale and retail outlets to control the entire chain from the field to the market.

As its name emphasizes, the American Breadbasket is a region where grain production is the focal economic activity. The eight states (Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota) that occupy the bulk of the region comprise 17 percent of the nation’s area, but they produce 29 percent of its crops and 38 percent of its livestock products. Unlike other regions where feed for livestock must be imported, the Breadbasket’s hogs and cattle consume corn and other crops produced locally, often on the same farm where they are fattened. Crops are harvested on nearly 60 percent of Iowa’s land and more than 55 percent of the land in Illinois, shares that are much larger than for any other states in the union.

Iowa and Illinois are at the core of the Corn Belt, the quintessential part of the Breadbasket. Climatic conditions enable corn to thrive in the fertile soils of the gently rolling glaciated plains. Because of its myriad uses ranging from livestock feed to a cheaply processed liquid sweetener, corn has remained a more reliable source of revenue than many other crops. The development of new uses for soybeans in recent decades has buttressed the market for this crop as well. Because corn and soybeans have complementary nutritional requirements, many farmers now grow both, alternating annual production depending on soil and market conditions. Wheat and other small grains are more common in cooler or drier areas like the western margins of the Breadbasket. Throughout the region, however, farmers have become more specialized. Long gone are the days when farmers raised a variety of crops and animals, using small machines and relying heavily on the labor of a relatively large family.

Evidence of specialization abounds on the landscape. The Breadbasket has a large livestock production, but fences have become an endangered species in many parts of the region, because crop farmers often have given up animals completely. Traditional
market. In stark contrast to the rest of the country, most Breadbasket collective farms were solidly in the black (the expression “millionaire-kolkhoz” for those with seven-digit bank accounts originated), and collective farmers were well off. In the rate of private car ownership, the Breadbasket was well ahead of other regions in the Soviet period. The rectangular grid of the fields lends the whole region a rather uniform aspect, but a closer look actually reveals considerable diversity of farms. Ubiquitous bread aside, the labels of Breadbasket producers dominated on the canned meat, vegetable, and fruit shelves of Soviet grocery stores. Southern Ukraine and the northern Caucasus had the most productive grain farming in the country, as well as productive livestock breeding.

The change as you move from west to east is very gradual. The appearance of irrigation ditches and sheep flocks betrays the growing dryness and harshness of climate, and beyond the Volga high soil fertility combined with a dry, sunny climate favors the cultivation of some of the world’s best strains of hard wheat. Nature itself seems to have suggested a balanced mix of crops for the Breadbasket: the growing cycles of corn and wheat are complementary, and a year of a failed corn harvest is frequently a bumper year for wheat. The discrepancy between cycles of drought in western and eastern parts of the region also lends stability to its overall grain output.

The economy of smaller urban places of the region is rooted in agriculture. Some of them are actually the so-called agri-cities—headquarters of huge collective farms and the site for their processing industries. The local chemical fertilizer industry and major agricultural machinery and tractor building factories meet the needs of farming. Yet metropolises such as Tzaritzyn, Kharkov, and Rostov, where large agricultural plants are located, do not quite belong: they are in, but not of, the region. The coastal cities along the Black Sea from Odessa to Nikolaev to Mariupol’ were once major grain exporting centers, but today their economies are geared to the all-Russian manufacturing complex rather than local needs, while culturally they share the cosmopolitan mix of other Black Sea cities.
While many medium-sized cities dot the region, major metropolises are rare. The economic character of the region fosters dispersed rather than concentrated activity, and many major centers that serve the region are actually located outside its boundaries. Chicago is effectively the region's capital, but its status as a diversified industrial and global service center functionally makes it part of the Heartland. Other major centers serving the region Dallas-Fort Worth, St. Louis, and Minneapolis-St. Paul exist along or beyond its margins. Kansas City is the only metropolitan area with more than one million residents that sits squarely within the region.

The Breadbasket's residents harbour a long-standing suspicion of large cities. Heavy reliance on transportation and grain-handling companies, many of which were based outside the region, fueled the discomfort of many Breadbasket residents with what was perceived as excessive control by large external institutions. Because expenses have a seasonal regularity while income fluctuates dramatically, most farmers have to rely heavily on loans. In addition to providing funds for operating expenses and the purchase of land, banks have furnished money enabling purchases of expensive equipment. While acquiring land and equipment frequently was deemed prudent in years with high yields and high prices, declines in farm income because of the vagaries of weather or markets regularly placed many farmers in financial peril. Their difficulties periodically led to sharp revisions in banking practices, much to the consternation of farmers, whose longing for stability had brought diverse ethnic groups from all over Europe into the region in the first place.

The Mixture of Peoples

Ever since colonization started in Catherine the Great's time, a rich ethnic mix defined the region, where peasant transplants from all over Europe easily sent down firm roots. Because Russian peasants were tied to the land, the government issued an invitation to settle the empty steppes of "New Russia" (today's Southern Ukraine) to land-hungry Europeans. The settlement began with "New Serbia," when thousands of Serbs occupied what today is roughly Kirovograd oblast. People as diverse as Swedes and Armenians followed, but the ones who responded in great numbers were the Germans.

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With settlers promised religious freedom, towns and villages with names like Munich, Stuttgart, or Strasbourg began to sprout in Novorossiya. By the early 20th century, most Germans had moved farther east into the steppes beyond the Volga, where an autonomous republic of Volga Germans existed between 1918 and 1941. The eastward drift of German settlers along the Chernozem belt was tragically continued during World War II, when they were deported to northern Kazakhstan and the Altai territory. Even in that new location, the majority of Germans prospered and their communities became models of efficiency for Slav settlers. But while preserving compact communities, most Germans are fully Russified and no longer speak German.

The Cossacks as well drifted to the East, following the movement of the steppe frontier. Many “unemployed” Don Cossacks bypassed by the frontier moved farther east to the Volga, Ural River, and Orenburg areas to guard the Kazakh frontier, while the remainders of the Zaporozhian host were moved to the northern Caucasus. The Ukrainian flow eastward was the most spectacular. It started in the 16th century when Muscovite government opened its lands in the so-called Sloboda Ukraine (present-day Kharkiv-DonBass area) for settlement by Ukrainians fleeing Polish oppression. Since the earliest sections of the Breadbasket, Novorossiya, was mostly colonized by Ukrainians, they were the first to develop the technique of plowing through the matted roots of the virgin steppe with heavy plows pulled by buffalo teams. The Ukrainian sod-busters were among the pioneers throughout the steppe belt all the way to its Siberian outcrops. In many parts of this belt, Ukrainians left a strong imprint on landscapes and speech patterns, and initially outnumbered Russians; but by now the two groups have almost completely blended and most Ukrainians claim Russian as a mother-tongue.

The industrial development of Novorossiya and the Northern Caucasus brought an influx of Russians. Today the population of Southern Ukraine is split between Russians Scandinavians were the largest group migrating into the northern part of the region, while Germans were foremost among the complex mix that settled in the central states, and descendants of immigrants from Great Britain were more common in the southern tier. These broad generalizations mask the considerable complexity that abounded at local levels, however. Ukrainians, Germans from the Volga region, French émigrés, and numerous Canadians also filtered into the region. Widespread communication required multilingual approaches. For a short period in the 1870s, official documents of the state of Nebraska were published in German, Swedish, and Czech as well as English. The pattern of rural settlement in the Breadbasket facilitated the blending of this conglomerate of immigrants. The region’s farmers were not concentrated into small villages as was common in other parts of the world, so the inward-looking villages could not serve as vehicles for perpetuation of cultural differences. The dispersed pattern of family farmsteads encouraged uniformity both of the people and of the landscape. Most immigrants and migrants from the eastern U.S. belonged to the same “nordic” family of European culture or its American derivatives, and by the time other ethnic groups started migrating in significant numbers around the start of the 20th Century, almost all farmland had already been settled. As a result, the Breadbasket emerged as one of the most homogenous parts of the nation with the greatest prevalence of white Americans.

In some ways, this model melting pot emerged as the embodiment of the nation as a whole. “See how it plays in Peoria!” long has been an expression anticipating that the reactions of residents in that central Illinois city will foreshadow those elsewhere in the U.S. More recently, Des Moines, Iowa, has become a favored site for market researchers to test how new products and advertising strategies may be received by consumers in other parts of the country. While changing demographics have significantly altered the ways that other regions relate to each other, the Breadbasket remains as the middle ground, the part of the United States against which all others areas can be measured.
and Ukrainians in equal proportions, and Ukrainian nationalism there is rather unpopular. On Cossack lands, the Cossacks were hopelessly outnumbered by Russians proper even before the 1917 Revolution. The homogenizing environment of the Breadbasket and the Slav ancestry of major settler groups allowed the region to become Russia’s most efficient melting pot, more so than the Heartland, where the coexistence of ethnic communities created an ethnic salad.

The blurred all-Slav identity of residents helped the region become something of a spokesperson for the nation, the embodiment of things all-Soviet. Here sociologists sought the “average Soviet man,” and the slogans of many national economic initiatives were born. From Brezhnev to Gorbachev, the rulers of the USSR came from the Breadbasket, the region that always enjoyed a rather special relationship with the state.

THEME 2: THE CHECKERBOARD OF GOVERNMENT ACTION

In satellite imagery, the Breadbasket looks like a blueprint made with a ruler and compass: rectangular fields, straight lines of irrigation canals, and protective tree belts planted to block dry winds from the Asian interior. These flat expanses are like a clean sheet of paper that almost invites a willing hand to draw geometric patterns. For the Soviet state with its itch to regulate everything, the temptation was irresistible. The region became a testing ground where simple two-dimensional “geometrical” solutions were sought to solve complex problems, while ignoring the “verticals” of three-dimensional human beings.

No other region suffered so much by the forced collectivization of the 1930s. The government believed that the fertile soils of the Breadbasket nurtured the dangerous sprouts of capitalism exactly because the region was old Russia’s model of efficient commercial farming. With much land and few people, the estates in the southern steppe were the first in Russia to resort to the use of modern farm machinery and free

The Breadbasket maintains its traditional association with values that Shortridge felt were central to the self image of the United States as a whole: self-reliance, democracy, and moral decency.

THEME 2: THE CHECKERBOARD OF GOVERNMENT ACTION

Even the landscape of the region conveys the sense of immutable order. More than in any other region in the nation, the Breadbasket’s landscape is one of right angles. Observers of the region invariably use the term “checkerboard” to describe the regular pattern of square and rectangular fields separated by straight roads that intersect at regular intervals. The origin of this landscape rests in part with the gentle topography of most parts of the region, as flat land permits people to establish fields and lay roads wherever they wish.

As independent Americans breached the Appalachians, however, Thomas Jefferson and other leaders of the new federal government established a more direct means of dividing new territories into units that could be sold. Starting in 1796, the General Land Office of the U.S. commissioned surveyors to divide land owned by the federal government into square townships measuring six miles on a side. Townships were divided into 36 one square mile sections, which in turn could be partitioned by halving and quartering into tracts as small as 40 acres. Large scale subdivision and sale of public lands reached its apogee as the wave of settlement rolled into the Breadbasket.

Use of the rectangular survey system instituted a new form of order upon the land of the Breadbasket. The creation of square and rectangular subdivisions of land established the framework for fields whose patterns have been altered only through expansion when adjacent farms have been consolidated. Also significant was the placement of roads along sectional boundaries at one mile intervals throughout the Breadbasket. This regular lattice of roads is evident on photographs taken by satellites.
hired labor. The boom was such that prior to the 1917 Revolution, Russia remained the world's largest exporter of grain. In this region that did not really know serfdom, most farmers were the serednyaks (literally "middle" farmers) - the well-to-do who were Stalin's prime target. Many serednyaks were Cossacks (since the Civil War regarded as hidden enemies of the Soviet order) or Ukrainians (permanently suspected of nationalism).

Stalin carried out collectivization with a vengeance. About 7 million peasants died in the terror of the campaign, while another 7 million died in its aftermath in the unprecedented man-made famine of 1932-33. This tremendous loss of life took place while the region was forced to provide grain exports to finance Soviet industrialization. Although the socialist farming built on this brutally "cleaned" arena eventually became the country's most successful, Russia never returned to its old role as an agricultural products exporter to the world. Artificially low state procurement prices supplied no incentive to expand Breadbasket output, and what the shortsighted Kremlin economists saved in the region was lost several times over as the USSR had to pay much higher prices for foreign grain; since the 1960s the Soviet Union has been one of the world's major importers. It is ironic that Soviet grain imports were coming from what were in a sense the overseas offspring of the Russian Breadbasket - the areas of the United States, Canada, and Argentina with large proportions of Ukrainian, Russian, or Russian-German transplants. Strangely for the region that so suffered from the Soviet state, it preserved its special rapport with official Soviet culture and ideology. This could reflect the tendency of its residents to reduce life's complexities to simple two-dimensional formulas. The regional culture is a mix of populism and self-righteous common sense which seems to know simple answers to all questions. The traditional suspicion of big cities and outsiders inculcated deep distrust of liberal ideas. The region's population, once decimated by collectivization, still actively opposed market-oriented economic reforms. In Krasnodar, for example, privately run ventures were declared to be cancer cells on the healthy body of the people.

The surveys that shaped the geometry of the region were but the first in an ongoing series of official endeavors that affected the region. After 1862, land became available free to homesteaders who occupied and improved the property for a period of at least five years. Direct disbursement of land by the government was augmented by federal donations of land to the states for the support of education. From the early 19th Century, one section of every 36 was donated for public schools, and in the 1860s, additional land was donated to states to support "land grant" universities. These public institutions, which often specialized in the development of agricultural technology, became the backbone of the higher educational system throughout the Breadbasket states. Over the last half century, the role of government in the lives of the region's inhabitants changed profoundly. As American agriculture matured and farm production increased to the point that supplies far exceeded demands in the United States and abroad, the federal government instituted a series of measures designed to reduce production and increase prices. Widespread governmental intervention in farm production began in the 1950s, including the manipulation of trade policies, such as the export of surplus commodities to provide emergency relief for poorer nations. Other federal farm policies have sought to inhibit soil erosion. These policies often succeeded in ending production on marginal farmland, but they also had unintended consequences, including the drastic reduction in equipment and fertilizer sales that resulted in the mid 1980s when farmers were given surplus commodities from government stockpiles as replacements for crops they would have grown themselves.

Ironically, such government programs are largely in response to the effects of unbridled individualism characterising the culture of the Breadbasket. More than anywhere else what was happening in the region reflected the decisions of individuals each acting in their own interests, while the bounty of mother nature tricked the local farmers into believing that all their successes were due only to their superb skills and mastery of nature. Such over-confidence and a certain short-sightedness helped produce the Dust Bowl.
Bowl conditions in the 1930s or the depletion of Ogallala basin today, as well as chronic crises of overproduction. At the same time, the farmers' feeling of being exploited from the outside and their traditional anti-urban bias frequently welled up into support for political movements like populism, progressivism, and even socialism that promised greater local control over major facets of economic activity — traits most paradoxical in a region of individualists well known as a bastion of the Republican Party.

Another irony is that the region so distrustful of big government should have come to rely so heavily on large-scale governmental activity, and that the traditional xenophobia of the conservative farmer culture should tolerate such strong dependence of the economy on the winds of international political change. During the 1970s, for example, exports of American farm products to the Soviet Union increased tenfold, only to be abruptly curtailed in the wake of American condemnation of the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan.

While many observers feel that the ultimate resolution of America's farm problems calls for reduction of surpluses by requiring roughly a fifth to a quarter of the nation's farmers to cease production, no reasonable means of implementing such a policy has been identified. The political costs of uprooting a half million or so households from the nation's farmsteads likely are too great for any group of national leaders to bear, especially given the significant power wielded by congressmen from states in the Breadbasket. On the other hand, the vast majority of the United States' residents, who live in metropolitan areas seemingly independent of the farms that surround them, like the relatively low food prices that result from oversupply. As a result, they do not favor drastic changes in national farm policies. The farmers of the Breadbasket and the thousands of other residents whose lives depend significantly on what transpires in the region's fields and feedlots therefore stay bound in a Gordian knot, conscious of the critical role they play in maintaining the nation's vitality but limited in terms of their abilities to control their own fates.

The history of relationship between the central power and Cossackdom is even more paradoxical. On the one hand, the Cossacks long resisted state attempts at regimentation of their lives; however, once won over they became the most faithful and willing servants of the regime. In the Russian Empire, Cossacks were routinely used to disperse anti-government demonstrations and perform punitive functions. The protection of the Empire's boundaries turned into the safeguarding of its "foundations" and political conservatism. The Cossacks' arrogant defiance of the state in the pursuit of their collective privileges always coexisted with militaristic discipline and cruel suppression of individual rights within the strata. Today, the emergence of self-appointed Cossack moral police makes public whipping of offenders a revived norm of local life.

The movement for the restoration of Cossack autonomy is driven not by ethnic sentiment, but by the desire to restore the coveted freedom of Cossackdom from the binding laws obeyed by everyone else, to renew their special covenant with the state as its well-rewarded defenders. The break-up of the Soviet Union was particularly painful to a people who see themselves as builders of Imperial glory, and thus has revived the traditional xenophobia of local culture. Even as Cossack movements seek territorial autonomy, most Cossacks favor the reanimation of the Soviet Union in its old boundaries. Now that the southern boundary of the Breadbasket has again become Russia's frontier with turbulent Asian neighbors, the new Russian state has to fight the temptation to use the Cossacks as willing pawns in new games of geopolitical chess.

As the rural dreaminess of the Breadbasket alternates with the insomnia of Cossack vigilance, the region seems to have reverted to the old fights between peaceful settlers and professional warriors, only now they joust within the regional character. The region of many a paradoxical about-face is again in uncertainty what to arm itself with: a Cossack whip or a peasant's plow.