Abstract

This essay examines Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's 1959 visit to Iowa through the lens of Cold War diplomacy and agricultural exchange. It situates the visit within the broader ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union, arguing that agriculture—particularly corn—served as an unlikely but effective medium for soft power and cross-cultural dialogue. By analyzing the meeting between Khrushchev and American farmer Roswell Garst, the essay explores the symbolic and practical implications of Soviet attempts to emulate American agricultural practices, and the systemic challenges that ultimately prevented their success.

Drawing on contemporary accounts and subsequent developments in U.S.-Soviet agricultural relations, the paper traces how this moment of personal diplomacy influenced later policy decisions, including U.S. grain exports to the USSR and ongoing seed cooperation. Khrushchev's visit, while largely symbolic, revealed the contrasting values embedded within capitalist and communist approaches to innovation, labor, and land. Though it failed to yield immediate transformation in Soviet agriculture, the encounter demonstrated the potential for mutual understanding in an era dominated by suspicion and hostility. In doing so, it reframes Cold War history to include the subtle, humanizing role of agricultural exchange in shaping international relations.

Genesis

In the summer of 2024, I studied U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War as a Charles B. Rangel Undergraduate Scholar, where I first encountered the unexpected story of Khrushchev's visit to Iowa—an event that immediately captured my interest. While meeting with the Foreign Agricultural Service, I was struck by how deeply agriculture remains embedded in the practice of diplomacy. Though I'm not originally from Iowa, studying at Grinnell has given me a strong sense of connection to the state and its distinct historical identity. As an independent major in International Relations, I was excited to explore this moment through the combined lenses of political science, history, and the Russian language. With an eye toward a future career in diplomacy, I was especially eager to investigate an unconventional but powerful form of soft power, one that played out not through summits or treaties, but in rural fields and shared meals. The idea of agricultural diplomacy's affect on our society was an idea that I hoped to explore farther.

Farming the Frontlines: Corn, Cooperation, and Cold War Curiosity

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Baumann Essay 2025

Introduction

In September of 1959, Soviet Leader Nikita Khrushchev, his wife, and his son, took a historic 13-day trip to the United States, becoming the first Soviet leader on US soil. The purpose of his visit was to foster mutual understanding between the United States and the USSR, advance soviet foreign policy, and make a positive impression on the American people.[1] On September 21st, he landed at Des Moines International Airport, where he was greeted by Iowa Governor Herschel Loveless and Mayor Charles Iles. The next morning, Khrushchev and his security detail made their way to a family farm in Coon Rapids.[2] Khrushchev's visit to Iowa was a rare moment of Cold War détente, where agriculture briefly served as a bridge between two rival ideologies. However, fundamental differences between Soviet collectivism and American agribusiness ultimately made long-term cooperation impossible. As Liz Garst, the daughter of Iowa farmer Roswell Garst later reflected, "The best way toward world peace is not finger rattling and building nuclear bombs. We need to keep our adversaries close to our blossoms… That beats nuclear bombs".[3] This short trip, seemingly small in the grand scope of the Cold War, carried enormous symbolic weight. It revealed the possibility of diplomatic tools beyond espionage and armament. Tools that could encourage mutual recognition of shared human needs, like food and survival.

Agricultural success was about more than just food production, it was a symbol of ideological supremacy. The U.S. and the Soviet Union used their agricultural accomplishments

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[1] Kyle A. Kordan, "Khrushchev Comes to America: The Advent of Mutual Understanding," *Chapman University Historical Review* 1 (2009): 164.
[2] Cold War Heartland. "Khrushchev Visit to Iowa.", https://coldwarheartland.ku.edu/documents/krushchev-visit-to-iowa.
[3] Danielle Gehr, "Khrushchev in Iowa: 60 Years Later, Garst Family Remembers Historic Trip," *Des Moines Register*, September 27, 2019, https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2019/09/27/khrushchev-iowa-60-years-later-garst-family-remembers-historic-trip/2350481001/.

as propaganda to showcase the effectiveness of their respective systems. The U.S., with its technological advancements and agribusiness model, vastly outproduced the Soviets, reinforcing the idea that capitalism was superior. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union struggled with food shortages, pushing leaders like Khrushchev to seek solutions abroad. Khrushchev especially attacked the management of soviet agriculture by praising the United States' agriculture.[4] This acknowledgment marked a significant shift in tone and hinted at the Soviet desire to adopt successful strategies, regardless of origin.

Iowa farmer and hybrid corn pioneer Roswell Garst played a crucial role in agricultural diplomacy. His belief that food could be utilized as a tool for peace led him to engage with Soviet officials and sell them American hybrid corn. Garst's actions demonstrated how private business interests could intersect with international relations, making him a unique figure in Cold War diplomacy. While Khrushchev was eager to learn from American farming techniques, deep ideological differences made lasting cooperation difficult. The Soviet Union's collectivized farming model clashed with America's market-driven agriculture. Additionally, practical challenges such as climate conditions, lack of infrastructure, and political skepticism hindered the full adoption of American methods in the USSR.

Khrushchev's visit briefly thawed Cold War tensions and led to increased agricultural exchanges between the two nations. However, these interactions did not fundamentally alter Soviet-American relations. The visit, however, highlighted the importance of food security in global politics and influenced future U.S. agricultural export policies. Despite Cold War hostilities, the U.S. would later supply grain to the Soviet Union during food shortages in the

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[4] Robert Kaiser "Once the Soviets Are Talking Sense." *Pulitzer Prizes*. https://www.pulitzer.org/article/once-soviets-are-talking-sense.

1970s.[5] Khrushchev's 1959 visit to Iowa was an early example of how agricultural exchange could serve as a form of soft diplomacy, revealing that even in times of political tension, food remained a necessity that could foster dialogue.

The Cold War Context: Agriculture as a Battleground

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union competed across numerous sectors, each striving to showcase the superiority of its economic and political system. Agriculture was no exception. Both nations viewed agricultural production not only as a means of sustaining their populations but also as a powerful symbol of their system's effectiveness. The United States held a dominant position in global agricultural production, largely due to the expansion of agribusiness, the adoption of hybrid seeds, and rapid technological advancements. American farmers emphasized the importance of using insecticides, fertilizer, and irrigation to maximize efficiency.[6] The U.S. government actively bolstered agricultural output through subsidies and price supports, ensuring high productivity. American farmers, benefiting from these innovations and support systems, produced significantly higher yields with fewer resources. Despite using less land and labor, U.S. agriculture managed to produce 60% more food than its Soviet counterpart.[7] This abundance enabled the U.S. to become a major exporter of wheat, corn, and soybeans, including shipments to the Soviet Union, highlighting the efficiency of its capitalist agricultural model.[8] Agriculture became a form of cultural pride—images of

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[5] Jack Rosenthal, "Roswell Garst, 79, Khrushchev's Farm Host in 1959," *New York Times*, November 7, 1977, https://www.nytimes.com/1977/11/07/archives/roswell-garst-79-khrushhevs-farm-host-in-1959.html.

[6] Roswell Garst, "Feeding a Hungry World," The North American Review 249, no. 1 (1964): 32, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25115927.

[7] Richard Bell, "Comparison of Agriculture in the United States and Soviet Union". *Economic Research Service,* U.S. Department of Agriculture, June 7, 1961: 1, https://downloads.usda.library.cornell.edu/usda-esmis/files/jq085j963/6682x743m/6h440w78g/ERSF-06-07-1961_Comparison_of_Agriculture_in_the_U.S._and_Soviet_Union.pdf.

[8] Richard Bell, "Comparison of Agriculture in the United States and Soviet Union": 2

abundant harvests and well-fed citizens appeared regularly in propaganda and advertising, reinforcing the narrative of American exceptionalism

In contrast, the Soviet Union struggled to maintain an adequate food supply. The inefficiencies of collectivized farming resulted in chronic food shortages and an urgent need for reform. Agricultural productivity was further hindered by harsh climatic conditions, limited rainfall, and insufficient capital investment. These persistent shortages not only led to lower living standards but also raised fears among Soviet leaders that the USSR appeared weak on the global stage—an unacceptable vulnerability for a superpower. Khrushchev responded by increasing prices paid to producers for compulsory state deliveries, a significant departure from Stalin-era policies. This change improved living conditions, narrowing the gap between the industry based urban citizens and the agriculture focused countryside citizens.[9]

Historically, before the rise of the Soviet Union, imperial Russia had been a significant grain exporter. However, under Soviet rule, agricultural production became increasingly problematic. To address these challenges, Nikita Khrushchev launched the 1954 Virgin Lands Campaign, an ambitious initiative to cultivate vast tracts of land in northern Kazakhstan and western Siberia. Khrushchev envisioned this campaign as a means to boost Soviet agricultural output, strengthen popular support for the regime, and demonstrate the effectiveness of socialist planning. Initially, the campaign showed promise, with Khrushchev even claiming that "the virgin lands have been a complete success. We have recouped all our capital investment and netted a profit of 18 billion rubles".[10] But the disappointing 1955 harvest exposed its flaws. Overreliance on single-crop

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[9] London School of Economics. "The Legacy of Khrushchev's Agricultural Reforms." *LSE Economic History Blog*, October 6, 2023. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/economichistory/2023/10/06/the-legacy-of-khrushchevs-agricultural-reforms/.

[10] U.S. Department of State. "Dispatch From the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State", *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Volume X, Part 1.* https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v10p1/d75.

cultivation depleted soil fertility, and inadequate anti-erosion measures led to massive soil degradation, with millions of tons of topsoil being lost to the wind.[11]

Faced with these agricultural setbacks, Khrushchev became increasingly interested in the success of American farming techniques, particularly in corn production in the mid-west region. He saw the development of a Soviet corn belt as a potential solution to food shortages and a pathway toward self-sufficiency. In 1957, Khrushchev confidently claimed that USSR would overcome the United States in per capita meat production by 1960. He emphasized that the lack of corn in the Soviet Union was directly impacting the lack of livestock, as there was nothing for them to eat. By the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the Soviet Union was still a long way from reaching this unrealistic goal.[12] The failure of these internal reforms deepened Khrushchev's sense of urgency. He understood that to save the Soviet agricultural system—and perhaps secure his own political future—he had to look beyond the Iron Curtain for answers.

Roswell Garst: The Unofficial Agricultural Diplomat

Roswell Garst played a critical role in using agriculture and food production as a form of diplomacy. Garst, an Iowa native, attended classes at Iowa State College, Northwestern University, and the University of Wisconsin but never completed a degree. In 1958, he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws degree by Grinnell College.[13] Garst was a true pioneer in agriculture and soft diplomacy.

In 1930, he co-founded the Garst & Thomas Hybrid Corn Co., helping to develop a hybrid seed corn that dramatically increased crop yields compared to traditional open-pollinated

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[11] Soviet History, "Virgin Lands Campaign," *Soviet History*, Michigan State University, , https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1954-2/virgin-lands-campaign/.
[12] London School of Economics. "The Legacy of Khrushchev's Agricultural Reforms."
[13] Jack Rosenthal, "Roswell Garst, 79, Khrushchev's Farm Host in 1959."

varieties. He was also an early advocate for chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and insecticides, constantly exploring new ways to improve farming efficiency. Additionally, he experimented with using corn byproducts to feed cattle, further pushing the boundaries of modern agricultural techniques.[14]

After years of begging a reluctant State Department for an export license, Garst first visited the Soviet Union in 1955, selling hybrid corn to farmers and hosting lectures his farming methods. He visited the USSR again in 1956 and early 1959 where he first met Khrushchev. Together, they joked around as old friends while discussing their ideas of how agriculture could bring peace to the world.[15] Garst told Khrushchev that the current arms race was a waste of time and money, and the soviets should increase their investment in agricultural production and research instead of armaments.[16] Garst strongly believed that food was a valuable tool that could be used to prevent escalation of the Cold War. Garst was not a communist himself, he was a strong capitalist who believed "[He would] rather learn how to live with them than die with them".[17] His motivations were both economic and ideological. Garst wanted to make money in an untapped Soviet market but also genuinely believed that better food production could ease Cold War tensions.[18] Garst's approach stood out because it's personalized diplomacy. Unlike state officials operating through protocol and caution, Garst spoke plainly and directly to Khrushchev, cutting through ideological posturing with practical, shared goals.

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[14]Gehr, "Khrushchev in Iowa: 60 Years Later".
[15] Stephen Frese, "Comrade Khrushchev and Farmer Garst: East-West Encounters Foster Agricultural Exchange." *The History Teacher* 38, no. 1 (2004): 41. https://doi.org/10.2307/1555626.
[16] Roswell, Garst "Experiences in Eastern Europe." *The North American Review* 249, no. 1 (1964): 28–30: 29. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25115926.
[17] Gehr, "Khrushchev in Iowa: 60 Years Later".
[18] Gehr, "Khrushchev in Iowa: 60 Years Later".

While Garst's mission was controversial in some American circles, many ordinary citizens viewed his efforts positively, seeing a rare opportunity for bridge-building at a time of global anxiety. Even Khrushchev seemed to recognize this openness. His son, Sergei Khrushchev, later recalled the friendliness of Americans who greeted them with smiles and even ironic protest signs with one side calling for "Freedom to Kazakhstan" and the other welcoming Khrushchev himself, reflecting a unique mix of humor and hospitality.[19]

Many viewed Garst's outreach as a noble effort to bridge the divide between two feuding superpowers. Others, however, were skeptical, questioning the wisdom of assisting a communist nation. The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities warned that "the exchange [of visits between U.S. and Soviet representatives] reveal the tragic failure of Western statesmen to recognize the character and the magnitude of the communist challenge".[20] They felt that this collaboration downplayed the seriousness of the threat of communism. Regardless, his work played a crucial role in shaping U.S.-Soviet agricultural relations and highlighted the power of food as a diplomatic instrument. By engaging directly with Soviet officials, Garst not only provided new technologies but also humanized the "enemy" in the eyes of both nations, creating an unusual but vital form of trust during an era dominated by fear and suspicion.

Khrushchev's Visit to Iowa: A Historic Moment

Khrushchev's visit comprised of stopping in important U.S. cities such as Washington DC, Los Angeles, and New York City. He visited the United Nations General Assembly, Twentieth

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[19] Victoria Kupchinetskaya, "Хрущёв в Америке: юбилей визита" [Khrushchev in America: Anniversary of the Visit]. *Голос Америки (Voice of America)*, August 29, 2009. Translated by Bella Nesbeth. https://www.golosameriki.com/a/khrushev-usa-anniversary-2009-08-29-56106137/661173.html.
[20] Frese, "Comrade Khrushchev and Farmer Garst", 43

Century Fox Studio, and Camp David. However, the only individuals he met with were President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Farmer Roswell Garst. [21] A ballsy invitation printed in the Des Moines Register in early 1959 was translated and read by Khrushchev within a few days of publication, sparking an increased interest in Iowa agriculture.[22] Soviet Officials had visited Garst's farm in the past and found his farm to be of similar size of soviet collective farms, making it of special interest. Khrushchev specifically requested to stop in Iowa, shocking U.S. government officials. At the farm, Khrushchev asked Garst all sorts of questions about his crops, methods, and machinery as the pair walked through the fields.[23] Khrushchev enjoyed Garst's boldness as he criticized soviet farmers for cultivating corn without fertilizing their soil, validating Khrushchev's own ignored criticisms of his country's agriculture production.[24] Khrushchev found particular interest in Garst's mechanized systems used to feed cattle and irrigate fields. This was the standard of most American farms but not yet used in the Soviet Union.[25] The Soviet leader was especially struck by how systematically American grain was formulated for livestock growth. It was clean, balanced, and nutrient-rich, unlike the "half-rotted" grain often used back home, which he described as being mixed with dirt and garbage.[26]

During the visit, Khrushchev emphasized the importance of trade, arguing that "the elimination of discrimination against the Soviet Union in trade matters was of primary importance," even accusing U.S. Secretary of Commerce W. Averell Harriman of setting up legal obstacles to fair exchange.[27] Harriman, in turn, suggested that "maybe Soviet achievements

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[21] Michael Knock, "Khrushchev in Iowa," *Humanities* (National Endowment for the Humanities), July/August 2009, https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2009/julyaugust/statement/khrushchev-in-iowa.
[22] Frese, "Comrade Khrushchev and Farmer Garst", p. 39
[23] Soviet History, "Coon Rapids Welcomes Khrushchev," *Soviet History*, Michigan State University, https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1961-2/corn-campaign/corn-campaign-texts/coon-rapids-welcomes-khrushchev/.
[24] Knock, "Khrushchev in Iowa."
[25] Robert Kaiser "Once the Soviets Are Talking Sense."
[26] Kyle A. Kordan, "Khrushchev Comes to America: The Advent of Mutual Understanding", 164.
[27] U.S. Department of State, "Dispatch from the Embassy in the Soviet Union"

were due not so much to the Communist or socialist structure but to very vigorous leadership".[28] Despite Garst's efforts, barriers between the USSR and American officials were stronger than ever, limiting the possibility of increased cooperation.

The visit was a media circus. American journalist lined the streets, climbed trees, and hid in the corn fields, hoping to take pictures and overhear conversations between Garst and Khrushchev. Garst was furious to see journalist trampling his fields and he began throwing corn cobs, prompting enthusiastic laughter from Khrushchev.[29] The image of a Soviet Premier standing in the middle of an Iowa cornfield, listening intently to a midwestern farmer is powerful, capturing a time when two vastly different worldviews intersected not with weapons, but with wisdom, curiosity, and wit.

Long-Term Impact and Legacy of the Visit

After the visit, the Soviet Union attempted to implement some of the agricultural techniques they had witnessed. But without personal ownership or economic motivation, farmers had little reason to adopt these new labor-intensive processes. An additional obstacle was the lack of educated young people who desired to work in agriculture. Universities and economic institutions were all located in cities, located far from the collective farms. After graduation, educated agricultural students refused to take up jobs on collective farms due to the drastically lower wages.[30] The lack of advanced machinery also had a large impact on soviet agriculture as

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[28] U.S. Department of State, "Dispatch from the Embassy in the Soviet Union"
[29] Alexander Trofimenko, "Как Хрущёв ездил в США: 60 лет визиту советского лидера" [*How Khrushchev Traveled to the USA: 60 Years Since the Soviet Leader's Visit*], *Газета.Ru (Gazeta.ru)*, September 15, 2019, translated by Bella Nesbeth https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2019/09/15_a_12652135.shtml?updated.
[30] Kyle A. Kordan, "Khruschev Comes to America: The Advent of Mutual Understanding",164

this led to delayed crop harvesting and major losses[31]. They attempted to copy the square-cluster method for planting corn and potatoes, but this failed miserably as the soviet tractors created rhombuses instead of squares.[32]

Failure was not just mechanical, it revealed deeper inefficiencies in the Soviet agricultural model, where innovation was stifled by bureaucracy and a rigid, top-down command structure. While the United States thrived on decentralized experimentation and individual ingenuity, the USSR's collectivist model struggled to adapt foreign methods to local realities. Many Soviet officials were reluctant to fully embrace Western technology, fearing it would undermine the ideological purity of their system. As a result, progress was often delayed or incomplete, creating frustration at multiple levels of the agricultural sector.

Despite early setbacks, agricultural cooperation has continued into the modern era. Today, the Pioneer Breeding Enterprise located outside of Des Moines, Iowa continues to cooperate with Russia, exporting their hybrid seed. While corn initially struggled to take root in the USSR, conditions have steadily improved. Russia has moved from relying on imported feed corn to producing it more effectively on its own, and there's growing confidence that the country may soon become self-sufficient in this area.[33] This progress is a slow but striking testament to the long-term value of cross-cultural agricultural exchange. What began as a symbolic visit in the midst of the Cold War eventually planted the seeds for practical cooperation, seeds that would

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[31] The New York Times. "Soviet Plans to Copy U.S. Corn Economy". February 4, 1955, 6. https://www.nytimes.com/1955/02/04/archives/soviet-plans-to-copy-u-s-corn-economy-soviet-now-plans-a-corn.html

[32] Kyle A. Kordan, "Khruschev Comes to America: The Advent of Mutual Understanding", 163

[33] Victoria Kupchinetskaya, "Хрущёв в Америке: юбилей визита" [Khrushchev in America: Anniversary of the Visit].

take decades to bear fruit. More than just corn, what Khrushchev took home was the idea that agriculture could be modernized through science, technology, and partnership rather than ideology alone.

Conclusion

Khrushchev's Iowa visit was a bold experiment in Cold War diplomacy, proving that even bitter rivals could find common ground in practical issues like food production. It was a moment where agriculture transcended politics, where tractors and topsoil became more powerful symbols than tanks or treaties. Yet, as hopeful as the visit was, it also laid bare the deep structural and ideological divides between the two nations. The U.S. system of private ownership and profit-driven innovation stood in stark contrast to the centralized, incentive-poor Soviet model. Garst's hybrid corn may have impressed Khrushchev, but without the economic and institutional support to implement similar practices, Soviet agriculture continued to lag behind. The encounter served as a rare humanizing moment between two superpowers, offering a glimpse of what diplomacy could look like outside the formal corridors of government. Khrushchev wasn't just meeting politicians. He was shaking hands with farmers, walking through barns, and witnessing the fruits of free-market agriculture firsthand. In many ways, the Iowa visit allowed Khrushchev to see a version of the American dream, albeit through a uniquely agrarian lens. That image lingered, not only in Soviet policy discussions, but also in the minds of American citizens who saw their way of life validated by such unexpected interest. Still, the visit left a lasting legacy. It opened the door to future exchanges and helped reframe agriculture as a tool of soft power. Decades later, this foundation allowed for U.S. grain exports to the USSR in the 1970s and continued agricultural collaboration into the modern era.

In the end, Khrushchev's visit to Iowa didn't change the trajectory of the Cold War, but it did change the conversation. It showed that amidst the missiles and rhetoric, there was still space for dialogue—rooted not in ideology, but in the shared human need to grow, eat, and feed others. And in that soil of mutual need, even the smallest seeds of understanding could take root.

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