

From Russia's Frontier



Meet a Nebraskan who is helping Russians grow their beef industry — and their independence.

by *Kindra Gordon*

Mention Russia and the first things that come to mind are likely communism, the Cold War, vodka, ballet and Sputnik — the first ever satellite to orbit the earth in 1957.

High-quality and abundant food — particularly beef, however, are not on the list of Russian notables. This is because the country's former communist roots meant most farms were government-owned and produced a sparse supply.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the transition to individuals owning farms and Russia producing more of its own food supply is slowly under way. It's a challenging task given Russia's vast land mass, nearly twice the size of the United States; the often harsh climate, which varies from tundra to subtropical; and the lack of agrarian knowledge, infrastructure and capitalistic skill.

Today, two decades since the fall of communism, Russia still imports about 80% of its food, and about 60% of the average Russian's wage goes toward their grocery bill. For comparison, Americans spend an average of 10% of their income on food.

Hungry for beef

Russia's food deficit is especially noticeable

in its beef supply, with 40% of its red meat imported. Much of the beef that is available at village grocery stores is of poor quality and expensive. Steaks and roasts are a rarity, and a steak on a restaurant menu can be priced from \$75 to \$125.

With only about 600,000 beef cattle in present-day Russia, and about 2 million in neighboring Kazakhstan, both countries are now spending billions of dollars to rebuild their agriculture industry, with a focus on quality beef production and feeding their own people.

Cattlemen of the Northern Plains, which has a climate similar to Russia's, have seized that opportunity, creating million dollar deals and shipping thousands of American beef cattle and equipment to central Asia during the last five years. These shipments of registered cattle will be the foundation of Russia's future beef industry.

While shipping cattle 6,000 miles across the ocean via crates loaded on mammoth aircraft is no small feat, those who are exporting cattle to Russia will tell you the even bigger challenge comes in getting the ranch infrastructure — something that is foreign to Russian culture — established.

Among those working side-by-side with Russian beef entrepreneurs is 32-year-old



► In 2008, Nebraskan Erik Burken and his wife, Jamie, moved to Kaluga, Russia. They are helping Sergei Nitsenko create his own Angus cow herd in Russia.

Erik Burken, a native of Blue Hill, Neb., with extensive beef industry experience. Since 2008 he and his wife, Jamie, have been living full-time in Kaluga, Russia, overseeing the startup of the Angus Genetics of Russia cow herd owned by Sergei Nitsenko.

Today, the operation has five different farms, and the herd numbers 6,500 breeding females, most of which have been imported from America within the last four years. Nitsenko's aim is to build a fully integrated beef system, including a feedlot and packing facility, to help re-establish Russia's beef industry.

Challenges abound

Burken's role is to lend his cattle expertise, design facilities, oversee building projects, assist with planning for the future and, most

► **Above:** The largest challenge is getting supplies. Most equipment that is used is from the United States and typically takes a minimum of two weeks to ship.

importantly, train the Russian workforce. This includes everything from cattle care to planting crops and putting up hay.

“Most of the Russian workers do not have practical livestock management experience,” he explains.

Burken is also challenged by the remote landscape. He explains that most of the land has not been touched for 10-15 years, and it can take up to a month to get supplies.

“We clear the trees, plow, and replant new grass stands and feed for the cow herd,” Burken says. There are also endless miles of fence to build and facilities to construct for the burgeoning cow herd.

“Russia does not have any of the infrastructure we have in America,” he explains. “Some things that I need for the operation must be ordered one month in advance or a minimum of two weeks in advance. Most of our equipment comes from America, which also makes it challenging when a problem arises.”

Additionally, most of the workforce is not skilled in any areas of practical livestock management.

“We have veterinarians,” he says, “but they have had little practical experience, or are primarily familiar with dairy cattle.”

Burken’s work ethic and unwavering desire to be part of the beef industry have prepared him for the Russian challenge at hand. While still in high school he worked for a local sale barn each Saturday and cared for a 60-head cow herd for a long-distance owner, while learning artificial insemination and recordkeeping from his agriculture education teacher.

In college, Burken interned at the Eatinger Ranch in the Nebraska Sandhills where he learned cows can do most of the work — an important lesson that is paying off now in the harsh conditions presented on the Russian steppes. Burken rounded out his collegiate beef education by being involved with meats judging, as well as completing the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) feedlot specialization program and working at Darr Feedlot of Cozad, Neb., for several months.

“Since Darr Feedlot is a custom feedlot, I was exposed to many different ranchers and the programs they each had. It enabled me to learn all aspects of the beef industry



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on a practical level and not in the textbook,” Burken says. It is knowledge he is putting to use daily in his managerial role in Russia.

Burken’s next move was to work with Whitestone-Krebs in Gordon, Neb. Here, he learned the genetic side of the beef business while developing bulls and heifers and inseminating the breeding heifers.

In 2008, when Eldon Krebs sold 250 bred females to Russia and owner Sergei Nitsenko expressed interest in having a manager from America, Burken knew it was the opportunity of a lifetime.

Progress and planning

Burken says the reward has been to see what he, Sergei and their team have built in the past four years.

“We have many visitors each week, and it is satisfying to see their faces when you can show them that cows can be outside all year round (which is contrary to Russian belief); a farm doesn’t need 100 people to run a 1,000-head cow herd; and that the beef business can work in Russia with the right planning,” Burken says.

He also takes pride in seeing several of the Russian workers whom he started with in 2008 now taking leadership roles.

For Burken, those individuals are a visual reminder of the many people who have helped him reach his own achievements in the beef industry.

Looking ahead, Burken foresees a tremendous opportunity for U.S. genetics — and the need for cattle expertise in Russia to continue due to the large land base and the desire of the government to build a Russian beef herd.

“There is a large opportunity for U.S. cattle genetics overseas,” he says, “but it is not just the sale that is going to keep this market open. Russia can buy the cattle, but they need help in the management of them. If a producer can help the Russian owner with some nutritional guidelines and breeding recommendations, this is what will keep the Russian market open to the U.S. If a producer is not willing to help the buyer get started, another country is willing to step in and take the business.”

For the present, Burken intends to continue pursuing his beef dream in Russia, but he says someday he may return to the United States to pursue a new challenge with his own beef herd.

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Burken’s view of life in Russia

For the past four years, Nebraskan Erik Burken and his wife, Jamie, have called Kaluga, Russia, home. Here, Erik shares his observations from the experience:

“Russian living is similar to America, but not as wasteful or prepared. The upper class lives in Moscow and enjoys the same things as New Yorkers do, but the lower class is pretty self-sufficient. Each family will have a garden, chickens and a potato plot. One or two families will have a milk cow that they hand-milk and sell to the

neighbors or trade for other goods. Most use fireplaces to heat their homes and gas stoves for cooking.”

Burken adds, “It was a big change for Jamie and me, but it has made us grateful for what we did have growing up and what we do have available to us in America. The young culture seems to be more energetic and teachable, while the older generation is more stubborn and unwilling to change or graft new ideas. I would say, sadly, the largest problem in Russia is with alcoholism.”