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Melissa K. Bokovoy. *Peasants and Communists: Politics and Ideology in the Yugoslav Countryside, 1941-1953.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998. xvii + 211 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4061-6.

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Resisting Partisan Collectivization

Melissa Bokovoy's succinct monograph is an attempt to revise the conventional understanding of the failure of the collectivization of agriculture in Yugoslavia after World War II. According to Bokovoy, most historians of Yugoslavia portray the decision to abandon collectivization as a centralized decision of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) taken in isolation from the peasantry. Bokovoy states that she herself agreed with this view when she wrote her dissertation, from which this book derives (p. 7).[1] However, Bokovoy's subsequent research has led her to believe that the portrayal of peasants as inert pawns is incorrect.

The author argues that peasant resistance to collectivization was the main cause of the failure of Yugoslav collectivization. Her account begins with the outbreak of warfare in Yugoslavia in April 1941, moves to the January 1949 decision to collectivize, and ends with the Communist Party of Yugoslavia's final abandonment of collectivization in March 1953. In the course of the book, Bokovoy examines the economics, politics, and psychology of collectivization and compares and contrasts Soviet and Yugoslav collectivization. Despite its title, the book should therefore be of considerable interest to scholars in many fields beyond Habsburg and Yugoslav history.

In her first chapter, Bokovoy sets the stage for the emergence of an unnatural and "dubious" alliance of peasants and communists in Yugoslavia. Of necessity, Bokovoy's account of World War II in Yugoslavia focuses on the evolution of the Partisans' relationship to traditional agriculture and private property and omits discussion of collaboration and resistance. Bokovoy states that the Partisans knew they could only garner peasant support by avoiding the wartime implementation of radical communist economic policies and by either co-opting or discrediting the prewar agrarian parties. Early in the war, this policy nearly backfired when zealous Partisans in Montenegro and central Serbia confiscated "kulak" property in liberated areas.

Bokovoy chooses the Croat Communist Party and the Antifascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia (ZAVNOH) as the "best example" of the wartime evolution of the KPJ policy toward the peasantry. (p. 19) In Croatia, ZAVNOH, led by Andrija Hebrang, formed a broad antifascist front and succeeded in co-opting the Croat Peasant Party (HSS), which had held a near-hegemonic status on the interwar Croat political scene. Bokovoy aims to show that the KPJ's policy evolved in reaction to the demands of the peasantry.

Yet by providing only a brief discussion of the HSS, Bokovoy neglects the status quo ante of agrarian politics in Croatia.[2] The tremendous and complex political impact of Stjepan Radic's HSS on the Croat peasantry in interwar Yugoslavia influenced the reception of the KPJ by the peasantry. Interwar peasant politics elsewhere in Yugoslavia also receive short shrift.

It is to Bokovoy's credit that she vitalizes the peasantry with agency instead of portraying it as a passive pawn. Yet without a discussion of interwar peasant parties in Croatia–and elsewhere in Yugoslavia–Bokovoy risks portraying the peasantry as a political tabula rasa, solely motivated by stubborn self-interest. In short, the lack of a portrait of the political stance of the Yugoslav peasantry in 1941 diminishes the salience of the very agency which Bokovoy strives to illustrate. The summary of the prewar KPJ's policy toward the peasantry cannot by itself replace analysis of interwar peasant politics in Yugoslavia.

Similarly, the reader detects little competition between fascists and communists during World War II for the support of the peasantry, which constituted three-quarters of the Yugoslav population. A brief section entitled "Contending for Hearts and Minds: Communists and Chetniks" has no parallel section for the Ustasha movement (pp. 11-14).[3] The absence of such competition within the narrative seems extraordinary, especially when considering the (often insincere) reverence paid to the peasant by the political right's ideology in Yugoslavia during the 1930s. Bokovoy writes that "[m]any peasants may not have been aware that they were helping to support the Communists" (p. 23). It would have been interesting to read in more detail about how the KPJ manipulated the HSS network during the war.

With tongue in cheek, Bokovoy entitles her second chapter, which deals with the immediate postwar years, "Promises Fulfilled." As the KPJ emerged from the war, it refined and disseminated the "creation myth" of the "partisan peasant" (pp. 35-37). The KPJ taught that the peasant, purged (though not entirely) of his backwardness through the baptism of fire in the liberation struggle, would form an unbreakable alliance with the proletariat. This alliance would become the foundation of the communist Yugoslav state.

Bokovoy shows that, although it was both theoretically brilliant and utilitarian, this myth would become a handicap. Many peasants may well have become KPJ supporters during the war, but, as the KPJ would discover on the issue of collectivization, this did not necessarily mean that the peasantry supported communist policies.

Mosa Pijade became the eventual "point man" for the initial collectivization plan. First, the massive distribution of expropriated land would arguably increase support for the KPJ among the lower and middle peasantry and thus militate against any eventual peasant resistance to collectivization. Second, the Yugoslav state would centralize control of all necessary agricultural supplies and machinery. Third, the KPJ would begin to collect agricultural produce through a centralized mechanism known as the *otkup*, or "collection" (p. 42). Much of this was, of course, inspired by Soviet agricultural economics. However, the KPJ favored the sovkhoz (state farm) over the kolkhoz (collective farm).

In order to encourage the collectivization of agriculture, the KPJ dubbed the new type of farm a *seljacka radna zadruga* (SRZ, or peasant work cooperative). The use of the word *zadruga*, as the old peasant communes were called in Yugoslavia, was a conscious choice. However, the peasants were not so easily deceived by attractive nomenclature. As Bokovoy explains, cooperatives had existed in interwar Yugoslavia, but "[t]hey were often small, bound by political or national constraints, and their members lacked the collective spirit." Their economic performance left much to be desired (pp. 47-48). Yet Edvard Kardelj believed that the basic structure of the interwar cooperatives could provide inspiration for the establishment of the SRZs.

In contrast to accounts which portray the KPJ as an ideological monolith in the years between 1945 and 1948, Bokovoy stresses the heterogeneous strains within the Party on collectivization. "The top leaders of the KPJ agreed on the need for centralized planning and rapid industrialization, but they disagreed on the method." (p. 56) Bokovoy shows in her third chapter that the KPJ was highly conscious of the horrific costs which forced collectivization had incurred in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. According to Bokovoy, peasant resistance to the *otkup* manifested itself almost immediately. Indeed, by the summer of 1946, the KPJ "yielded to the peasants' opposition to the procurement regimen" (p. 63). Whereas Boris Kidric supported rapid industrialization at the expense of the peasantry, the influential Croat communist Andrija Hebrang steadfastly counseled moderation and the gradual mechanization and rationalization of agriculture. Hebrang found a powerful ally in the agrarian minister and head of the Agrarian Council, Vaso Cubrilovic. Ignoring "the basic psychology of the peasant," warned Cubrilovic, would prove counterproductive.

In April 1947, the KPJ embarked upon the first Five-Year Plan. The KPJ, of course, supplied ample amounts of ideological literature and encouragement to the peasantry. Yet the KPJ continued to pursue a moderate course where peasant collectivization was concerned until 1948-1949.

Bokovoy's fourth chapter treats the impact of the Tito-Stalin split on collectivization in Yugoslavia. Bokovoy states that Soviet criticism of the relaxed pace of Yugoslav collectivization fell into a category by itself, separate from all the other acrimonious charges launched in 1948. According to Bokovoy, this criticism played a paramount role in the crisis because Stalin perceived collectivization as the most vulnerable point of the KPJ. The kulak allegedly continued to thrive in Yugoslavia.

The severe reduction in trade and economic credits from the Soviet Union after June 1948 combined with the low *otkup* figures to paint a bleak economic picture. Under these new conditions, Yugoslavia would not be

able to meet the ambitious targets of the First Five-Year Plan. The KPJ therefore decided in January 1949 to gradually accelerate collectivization and increase sanctions on peasants who refused to fulfill their *otkup* quotas. The new policy was announced in a combative and patriotic tone. Here was a way to reinvigorate the "partisan peasant" (pp. 97-98) and to counter simultaneously the accusations of the Soviet Union.

Having demonstrated the "dubious" foundation and nature of the "partisan peasant myth" in the beginning of the book, Bokovoy shows in the fifth chapter that the new policy caused a betrayal of the alliance between Party and peasantry. Once again, the peasantry refused to cooperate with the collectivization process. Tito and the KPJ, however, refused to consider a declaration of a Soviet "war" against the peasantry because doing so would destroy the myth. Instead, the KPJ came to believe that collectivization would occur most smoothly if several tiers of cooperative farms were established. Instead of a program of shock collectivization and dekulakization, the KPJ would gently prod the Yugoslav peasantry into ever more socialist forms of communes. Peasants would "voluntarily" come to see the more rational and industrialized farms as preferable to the "backward" smaller farms.

The local authorities were ordered not to force collectivization upon the peasantry. Inevitably, however, zealousness overcame some local authorities, who immediately set about establishing the highest form of collective. In most cases the problem was the reverse, as peasants and local officials refused to join the collectives at all. Bokovoy argues that the collectivization drive immediately caused "confusion and chaos in the countryside and revealed "the weakness of the party's organization in the villages" (p. 111). Countless acts of violent peasant resistance and a celebrated uprising at Cazin in Bosnia-Herzegovina also made it abundantly clear that the KPJ had not monopolized power in the countryside.

After an initial burst of enthusiasm, the growth of cooperatives soon decelerated. Moreover, by 1951 it became apparent that most of the peasants who had entered collective farms would seek to exercise their option to decollectivize after three years. Given the KPJ's consistent refusal to resort to a massive forced collectivization, the collectivization of Yugoslav agriculture never evolved beyond the precarious stalemate at the end of 1949.[4] Thereafter, peasant resistance and administrative chaos would force a string of reversals on the collectivization program. By the spring of 1953, the KPJ had abandoned collectivization and the *otkup*. Although Kardelj remained characteristically optimistic about the prospects of communist agriculture in Yugoslavia, the ensuing decades would witness a protracted muddle of agricultural policy.

Bokovoy crafts a tightly focused narrative in portraying the failure of collectivization in Yugoslavia. This has many advantages for the reader, but it also results in several puzzling lacunae that damage the book. The first of these, already mentioned above, concerns the omissions regarding interwar and wartime agrarian politics in Yugoslavia.

A larger and far more troubling deficit is evident in the near absence of national and regional questions from the narrative. The question of regional variations arises once again through Bokovoy's choice of case studies. As stated earlier, Bokovoy identifies Croatia and ZAVNOH as the "best example" of the wartime evolution of communist policy toward the peasantry in Yugoslavia. From this Bokovoy seems to infer, but does not explicitly inform us, that the situation in Croatia was comparable to the political situation elsewhere in Yugoslavia. Even if Croatia is the best example, it does not necessarily follow that the situation was identical in other regions of Yugoslavia. Likewise, when Bokovoy later highlights Vojvodina in her analysis of postwar colonization, this does not mean that the results observed there can be extrapolated onto Yugoslavia as a whole. On the contrary, the expulsion of Germans and Hungarians from Vojvodina after World War II and the geography of the region meant that the supply of expropriated land was abundant and of particularly high quality.

Bokovoy focuses her account of the failed collectivization overwhelmingly on Croatia, Serbia, and Vojvodina. Although Bokovoy's analysis frequently alludes to differences in the regional or national reception of collectivization, she does not seem particularly interested in pursuing these for further investigation. One reads variously of national slurs and dramatic differences in collectivization between nationalities in multiethnic villages. The fact that "many peasants, regardless of nationality or region, believed that they were defending their most fundamental interests" does not mean that the qualitative differences of these national or regional responses should be ignored (p. 118).

So cursory is Bokovoy's treatment of these episodes–which occur in numerous instances–that her reluctance to consider national and regional variations appears conscious and consistent. Admittedly, my own interest in the possible intersection of nationality and agricultural

policy in early communist Yugoslavia may betray a myopic focus on the role of national identity in Yugoslav history. I am also willing to admit that the different soil, climate, and geographical conditions explain some of the regional variation (e.g. between Vojvodina and Macedonia) in peasant responses to collectivization.[5] Yet I still believe that the regional and national variations which appear in the book demand more analysis than Bokovoy has performed. In her introduction, Bokovoy admits as much when she mentions that "[d]issension often broke out in the ranks when the KPJ leadership's plans threatened the local and regional interest of its provincial cadres and when nationalist loyalties challenged the fragile 'brotherhood and unity' of the Yugoslav socialist state" (pp. xiv-xv). However, Bokovoy never fully develops this tantalizing thread.

Finally, a brief comment is in order on the question of peasant agency. Bokovoy makes a laudable effort to inject the peasantry with agency and thus to present us with a nuanced portrait of peasants in postwar Yugoslavia. She also provides a fascinating portrait of how the local authorities became trapped between the central decision-making organs of the KPJ and the peasantry. However, in constructing a "bottom-up" narrative where "top-down" narratives have hitherto dominated, she perhaps revises too much. Although she discusses the impact of Soviet pressure after the Tito-Stalin split, little is said of western interest in the path of the Yugoslav economy.

Bokovoy's book is a flawed but provocative contribution to the scholarship of early communist Yugoslavia. The specific and detailed nature of the topic makes it too technical for use in most undergraduate history courses. However, the book deserves to be widely read and discussed among scholars in fields far beyond Habsburg and Balkan history.

Notes:

[1]. Melissa K. Bokovoy, *Separate Roads to Collectivization: The Agrarian Policy of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, 1941-1949* (Bloomington: Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1991).

[2]. Thus, the seminal, two-volume work of Ljubo Boban on Vladko Macek and the interwar HSS is not cited, and Fikreta Jelic-Butic's work on the HSS during World War II is only indirectly cited. See Ljubo Boban, *Macek i politika HSS, 1928-1941*, 2 vols. (Zagreb: Liber, 1974), and Fikreta Jelic-Butic, *Hrvatska seljacka stranka* (Zagreb: Globus, 1983). Bokovoy does later provide a concise summary of the role of agricultural cooperatives in interwar Yugoslavia.

[3]. Although not bearing directly on her thesis, Bokovoy's treatment of the relationship between the Chetniks and the Bosnian Muslims (pp. 12-13) needs to be reexamined. Her portrayal of the Chetnik movement's intentions towards the Muslim population of Bosnia-Herzegovina is far too benign.

[4]. Bokovoy quotes a peasant as saying that "they can't imprison all of us." (p. 136) This would seem to indicate that the peasantry was self-confident in its power to resist the KPJ over collectivization.

[5]. Susan Woodward has accused scholars of Yugoslavia of focusing too much on the national question. Cf. Susan Woodward, *Socialist Unemployment: The Political Economy of Yugoslavia.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p.34, n. 12

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