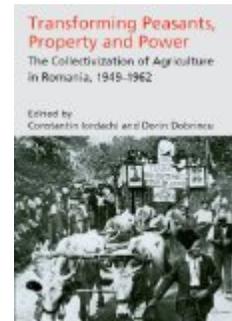


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## Property Relations and the Village in Communist Romania

The fruit of a project initiated and coordinated by Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery, and first published in Romanian in 2005, this remarkable volume edited by Constantin Iordachi and Dorin Dobrinu goes well beyond a merely descriptive overview of the collectivization of agriculture in Romania. It provides, for the first time, a subtle analysis of the phenomenon itself, of its consequences for the economic situation of the peasantry, and its effects on peasant attitudes toward property and political power. The interdisciplinary nature of the contributions, their analytical acuity, and the rigor of the research recommend this study as a fundamental text for understanding not only the communist regime, but also the impact on property relations after 1990. The research for this volume, conducted by a group of twenty anthropologists, historians, and sociologists from Romania, the United States, and Great Britain who use hitherto untapped archival and oral sources, offers a yardstick against which further studies on collectivization in East Central Europe will be judged.

The collectivization of agriculture was the principal measure taken by the Romanian Communist Party against the peasantry, who formed 80 percent of the adult population, to transform Romania, following the Soviet model and employing Stalinist norms and practices. The

nationalization in June 1948 of industrial, banking, insurance, mining, and transport enterprises not only allowed the introduction of centralized quantitative planning but also destroyed the economic basis of those stigmatized as class enemies. Confiscating private share holdings and threatening their owners was relatively straightforward; agriculture posed more complex problems. On March 2, 1949, the ownership of land was completely removed from private hands. This permitted the liquidation of the remnants of the old landowning class and of the “kulaks,” a Soviet term defining “rich peasants” as those who hired labor or let out machinery, irrespective of the size of their holding. The land, livestock, and equipment of landowners who possessed property up to the maximum of fifty hectares permitted under the 1945 land law were expropriated without compensation. Virtually overnight the militia moved in and evicted seventeen thousand families from their homes and moved them to resettlement areas. The confiscated land, totaling almost one million hectares, was either amassed to create state farms or was organized into collectives which were in theory collectively owned but in fact state run since the Ministry of Agriculture directed what crops were to be grown and fixed the prices. Members of the collective were allowed to keep small plots of land not exceeding 0.15 of a hectare.

The majority of peasants, ranging from the landless to those who worked their holdings using only family labor, were organized into state or collective farms. This required extensive coercion. Resistance to collectivization resulted in some eighty thousand peasants being imprisoned for their opposition, thirty thousand of them being tried in public. Collectivization was completed in 1962, and its results put 60 percent of the total area of fifteen million hectares of agricultural land in collective farms, 30 percent in state farms, and left 9 percent in private hands. The latter consisted of upland where inaccessibility made it impractical to collectivize.

As Kligman and Verdery explain in their foreword, they “conceptualized collectivization as a fundamental means for understanding the very formation of the Romanian Party-State, in contrast to its more customary conceptualization as an auxiliary to industrialization and urbanization” (p. x). In this regard, a number of the contributors (Robert Levy, Linda Miller, and Marius Oprea) focus on policies and practices at the national level (i.e., property legislation, requisitions, propaganda, and discussion of the form collectivization should take). The other contributors conduct case studies, embracing localities in Transylvania (Julianna Bodó, Călin Goina, Kligman, Sándor Oláh, Michael Stewart, Virgiliu Țărău, Verdery, and Smaranda Vultur), Moldavia (Dobrincu and Cătălin Stoica), and southern Romania (Iordachi, Liviu Chelcea, and Daniel Lățea). It is appropriate that Levy’s chapter should open the volume since his pathbreaking research on Ana Pauker, begun in the late 1980s with interviews with several prominent party figures and continued in the early 1990s when persistent attempts to consult the relevant files were finally rewarded with access to a host of unpublished documents concerning collectivization, enabled him to show that her role in collectivization was far more measured than had hitherto been believed.

That is not to downplay the role coercion played in effecting collectivization. As Iordachi and Verdery state among their conclusions, “without force, Romanian collectivization would have been impossible” (p. 465). Yet their book challenges a simplistic view of the use of violence and resistance to it in the collectivization process. After the 1989 revolution there were attempts to play up anti-Communist resistance. To do so was important in reestablishing self-esteem. Resistance helped to rekindle the flame of national honor after the ignominy of the Nicolae Ceaușescu regime. An over-compensatory emphasis on resistance could also be explained by the fact that it was covered up for so long by Communist writ-

ers. But as opponents of the regime in the villages were honest enough to admit, they offered only isolated examples of resistance and were of no military importance. They posed no threat to the stability of the new regime because few followed their example. Nevertheless, the length of the process of collectivization, covering almost thirteen years, illustrates the party’s inability to bring the peasants into line. As Levy shows, only in 1949 were collectives established without violence. After that, in the words of Iordachi and Verdery, “it took ample and systematic efforts over a long period and the use of various techniques of physical coercion and psychological terror, supported by an unusually large system of repression, to force the peasantry to give up their land and join collective farms” (p. 464).

This book represents a major intellectual achievement by opening up a new research agenda based on the interdisciplinary study of Communist regimes during their early stages of consolidation. Verdery and Kligman, the initiators of the project, and Iordachi and Dobrincu, the editors of the volume, are to be commended.

Alina Mungiu-Pippidi is one of the most outspoken and courageous public figures in Romania. She is a trenchant yet constructive critic of Romanian politics and society and as a university professor has initiated and secured funding for numerous research projects into which she has drawn her students. This volume, a revised version of a study that first appeared in Romanian under the coauthorship of Mungiu-Pippidi and Gérald Althabe in 2002 under the title *Secera și Bulldozerul* (The sickle and the bulldozer) is the product of one such project and is based on fieldwork carried out in Romania with a group of her students in political anthropology at the National School of Political Studies in Bucharest: Emanuel Răuță, Victoria Timofte, Ion Naval, Stejărel Olaru, Ionuț Ștefan, and Dana Ceaușescu. Let me say from the outset that the translation into English is excellent. Interviews were also filmed, forming the basis of a BBC documentary that the author wrote and directed entitled *A Tale of Two Villages*, broadcast by the BBC World Service in the summer of 2003. The premature death of Althabe prevented his involvement in the project beyond the stage of training the researchers and reviewing Mungiu-Pippidi’s field.

The main questions addressed by this study are first, to what degree can a program of social change, imposed to a major degree through coercion, endure once coercion ends? Second, is the state able to change the essentials of a peasant society in any sustainable way? Mungiu-Pippidi’s work attempts to answer these

wide-ranging questions by focusing on a specific period and region where circumstances have rendered such measures quantifiable, namely, two Romanian villages under communism. The two villages in question—Nucșoara in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains and Scornicești in the lowlands, the birthplace of Romania's Communist dictator Ceaușescu—have very different histories and yet, Mungiu-Pippidi argues, “seem to have converged towards a similar outcome” (p. 1). Nucșoara was notorious for its inhabitants' resistance to the imposition of communism and as a mountain village remained uncollectivized. Scornicești, an impoverished village in the plains, was not only collectivized but also industrialized and urbanized. Yet despite the variation in state intervention between the two villages, their political preferences in 2001, the year of the field research, were similar. “They both voted for the postcommunist party, they did not tolerate any political dissent in the village, and they were missing the former communist regime” (p. 11).

In chapter 1, Mungiu-Pippidi reminds us that the processes of political modernization were distorted under communism. Communism imposes one single political option, and those who overtly reject this condition were subject to ostracism and imprisonment. Communist regimes, of course, also pursued economic and social development. The Romanian Communist Party moved swiftly to transform Romania, following the Soviet model. The history of Nucșoara and Scornicești is surveyed in chapter 2, and is followed in the next chapter by an invaluable analysis of peasant land tenure in a historical perspective. Mungiu-Pippidi's construction and deconstruction of rural property, based in part on interviews with villagers from Nucșoara, is one of the most enlightening sections of this study and offers important primary material to other scholars.

In Nucșoara, the total number of families sentenced to hard labor or executed for political offences prior to the amnesty of 1964 numbered twenty-eight and between them they owned some ninety hectares of land. Their holdings were confiscated when they were sentenced as “bandits” and allocated to poorer peasants and to local Communist Party officials. However, after the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989, a law regarding the victims of communism annulled their sentences and stipulated that their lands be returned. This was more easily prescribed than done. Since the late 1950s until the adoption of the above law these lands had changed hands many times and in 1991 over two hundred families owned the ninety hectares. Interminable lawsuits ensued, which served only to embitter relations between the owners and

claimants. Mungiu-Pippidi's discussion of these conflicts forms the basis of chapter 4.

Communist Romania's plans to industrialize from an agricultural base required not only massive financial investment, including foreign loans, but also a major readjustment of labor resources, involving movement from the land to the factory. The measures included the combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries and the gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country through a more equitable distribution of the population over the country. Scornicești was one of the many villages designated for development into a town under this plan, which was termed by Ceaușescu “systematization.” The proportion of the country's urban population rose from 22 percent in 1948 to 30 percent in 1965 and to 49 percent in 1983, and was projected in 1988 to rise to 75 percent in the year 2000. The number of towns with populations ranging from under 3,000 to 320,000, rose from 152 in 1948 to 236 in 1978. Included in their number was Scornicești. The movement to the towns siphoned off people from rural areas and diminished village populations, such as that of Nucșoara.

Of the thousands of exhortations made by Ceaușescu to the Romanian people none was seized upon with more alacrity by the international media than his call in March 1988 for the reduction in the number of villages “from about 13,000 at present to 5,000 to 6,000 at most.” His intention was taken at face value by the Western media as a plan to physically demolish seven to eight thousand villages when in fact most of the villages were to be subsumed administratively into “communes” and given the name of the principal center in that commune. Chapters 6 and 7 take as their subject the application of systematization and urbanization in Romania, their effects on the rural population, and the consequent transformation, to use Mungiu-Pippidi's phrasing, of the “dependent peasant” to the “citizen-peasant.”

Yet what characterizes the “citizen-peasant”? Mungiu-Pippidi offers a graphic assessment: “seven million peasants, who barely reach subsistence levels, have no idea of the difference between the political right and left, and buy on average a single toothbrush in a lifetime, pose a development problem not just for Romania, but for the European Union [EU] in general. It is hard to believe that by the twenty-first century the peasant problem in Romania has not only remained unsolved, it had actually been recreated close to its historical original, in spite of the efforts to eliminate rural underdevelopment” (p. 189). Had the majority of EU leaders not dismissed views of

Mungiu-Pippidi and other leading analysts of Romania, it is hard to believe that they would have so blithely accepted that Romania was ready in January 2007 for entry into the EU.

Taken together, the books provide a rich and varied discussion of collectivization and its continuing effects. Twenty years after its fall, the Communist Party still casts a long shadow in the region.

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