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Stephen K. Wegren. *Land Reform in Russia: Institutional Design and Behavioral Responses.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. xix + 340 pp. $55.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-15097-1.

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Assessing the Impact of Institutions in Rural Change

Land Reform in Russia makes an important contribution to scholars' and policymakers' understanding of the progression and extent of rural change in the largest Soviet successor state. Moreover, this study addresses issues of conceptualizing transformation and continuity in post-Communist systems. The author of numerous earlier studies of agrarian reform, Stephen K. Wegren brings a wealth of background knowledge and experience to bear on his analysis of the crafting of laws, rules, and programs to create and regulate property rights in the countryside as well as establishing a market for ground in Russia. His assessment of the results of these policies uses extensive survey data and economic information to delineate the ways in which citizens have used new chances for owning or working land.

Placing his work firmly within the paradigm of institutional economics, Wegren focuses in the first part of his book on the evolution of land reform from the late Soviet years through Vladimir Putin's second term as president. This discussion considers the broader political milieu within which were produced laws, decrees, and other government regulations affecting ownership, leasing, sale, inheritance, or mortgaging of farmland (or ground for a rural dwelling). Wegren's analysis thus parses the provisions and intent of successive versions of the "institutional design of [agricultural] reform" (p. 4). His examination gives a detailed account of significant laws, decrees, and regulations, including the 2002 legislation "On Agricultural Land Transactions," fundamental to understanding contemporary agricultural property rights. The author demonstrates that the fundamental ideas that have guided the establishment of ownership as well as the ability to buy and sell "agricultural land" emerged in policies set–particularly by executive decisions–during Boris Yel'tsin's first term as president of Russia (p. 11). Wegren insists that observers cannot characterize policy implementation and/or reactions to programmatic change without knowing what activity a new rule, official plan, or structure requires, rewards, or punishes–and therefore how an actor's possibilities and disincentives are altered. As a consequence, Wegren is skeptical about the importance of "resistance" to explaining the outcome of privatization schemes in the Russian Federation (p. 63).

These have not given rise to a post-Communist countryside dominated by family agricultural holdings. Indeed, in 2008, there were 267,000 "private farms" (p. 21). In contrast, revamped collective and state farms ("corporate farms" [p. 20]) comprise about two-thirds of all ground used for agriculture; and commercially based farming enterprises with holdings of at least 50,000 hectares have emerged. While those who had worked on the *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* gained title to private plots, those did not even "average" one-half hectare in 2007 (p. 20). Nationally, 7.3 percent of the land was legally possessed "by citizens" (p. 19). Most individual Russian proprietors held "land shares," rather than demarcated plots of ground with clear, well-established proof of ownership. Wegren argues that this outcome is the result of the legal provisions for rural land reform, and that the various government regulations issued over the years since the late Mikhail Gorbachev era in Russia protected the existence of what have come to be the "corporate farms." Moreover, the government is an important actor in the market for rural land, because of the formulations in rules enacted.

The author's preferred approach to evaluating institutional change is realized through extensive use of survey and economic data. He draws on answers to surveys undertaken from 1993 to 2006. Together, these projects involved inquiries in sixteen different subjects of the Russian Federation; and the jurisdictions were located across the country. These polls of village "households" allow Wegren to tease out the way in which differentiated circumstances allowed for varied chances to take advantage of the land reforms (p. 107). Individuals and families with higher incomes and more capabilities to undertake tasks of cultivation and animal husbandry were more likely to own or rent larger amounts of land. As a result of divergent finances, abilities, and efforts to gain from the reforms, lower and upper classes were beginning to form in the agricultural areas, Wegren suggests. Ownership and leasing of land was also conditioned by socioeconomic and infrastructural conditions in the countryside.

In the 2006 surveys, reactions to possibilities to gain or use ground were patterned similarly across the Russian Federation. Such a result underlines Wegren's contention that national laws and regulations imposed a framework within which local officials and individuals dealt with land privatization. Moreover, his research and analysis remind the reader that understanding the substantive content of policy is essential.

Land Reform in Russia will be an essential volume for those wishing to understand both policymaking and policy outcomes in post-Communist agriculture, for those questioning how "legacies" of the Communist era have been preserved and have metamorphosed, and for scholars interested in institutions. The book will reward the reader with a rich assortment of factual information, as well.

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