



Constantin Iordachi, Arnd Bauerkämper, eds.. *The Collectivization of Agriculture in Communist Eastern Europe: Comparison and Entanglements*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014. 560 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-615522563-5.

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As a policy, collectivization was applied throughout the Soviet Union, Communist Central and Eastern Europe, and Communist states outside of Europe. Although the objectives, application, and methods were drawn from Soviet experience, collectivization varied hugely between states and within rural society in individual states. Editors Constantin Iordachi and Arnd Bauerkämper demonstrate that the process of collectivizing agriculture was neither “little Stalins” enacting carbon copies of a Soviet textbook nor each state being “exceptional” and deviating from the Stalinist model to create its own form of collectivization.

The dynamics of collectivization were driven by a series of complex interactions horizontally between states and vertically between different actors within states. The result was that collectivization was a series of de-synchronized and syncopated waves of acceleration, deceleration, repression, easing, and reversal, subject to internal and external forces and the interpretation by individual actors of events in neighboring states. Within the major waves of collectivization there were ebbs and flows.

The volume methodologically emphasizes transnationalism and comparison. It uses transnationalism in particular to focus on the transfer of

knowledge and practices, challenging the literature on the Sovietization of Eastern Europe that views Sovietization as the creation by Moscow of carbon copies of the USSR, stripping East European regimes of any agency. The transfer of knowledge and practice takes place horizontally between states and vertically within states. The use of comparison draws out differences and similarities and helps avoid the problem of methodological nationalism and exceptionalism. One of the paradoxes of the Sovietization model of Communism in Eastern Europe is that it rarely explicitly includes Soviet experiences. The inclusion of chapters on the Soviet Union by Lynne Viola and the Baltic republics by David Feast is warmly welcomed. These chapters help to connect the experience of Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union. The Baltics provide a useful bridge between the East European states and those areas incorporated into the Soviet Union after World War II and where the experience of collectivization was different from that of the rest of the USSR. The inclusion of all of the Communist states of Eastern Europe is to be commended as it allows the full experience of collectivization in the region to be examined and light to be shone on less frequently studied states, such as Albania.

In their introduction, the editors highlight that in the broader historiography collectivization has been studied through a number of different perspectives and methodologies, from the decisions of policymaking elites in the capital to the experience of peasants during and after collectivization. The strength of this volume is that the individual authors have all tried to capture the full experience of collectivization within their chapters, focusing not only on the processes by which decisions were made in the capital but also on the experiences of those on the ground implementing collectivization and the experience of peasants themselves.

The work emphasizes three main areas. The first examines policymakers at the center whose responses were based on ideology, factional infighting, and pressures from inside and outside the state. The second area of focus is the local administration and actors tasked with implementing collectivization; their role as intermediaries between the center and rural society was critical, blamed in some cases for progressing too slowly, in other cases for extreme brutality and violence. The third area of focus is on rural society itself as the object of collectivization, and here the emphasis is on the processes of collectivization as well as the strategies and responses of rural society to collectivization.

Emphasizing the idea of entangled history, the volume explores the role of connections at play during collectivization. For the most part, authors focus on the elite level, the connections between Moscow and the local elites, but we can also see how interactions between policymakers within the region influenced collectivization. As Jens Schöne demonstrates, in East Germany the Socialist Unity Party (SED) maintained close technical relations with Hungarian experts on collectivization. At the same time, they were looking at neighboring states, interpreting events, and adapting their policies accordingly; thus for SED hardliners, the retreat from collectivization was

the reason for problems in Poland, and hence, they argued that there should be an acceleration in collectivization. As the volume demonstrates, the entanglements did not stop with Moscow and one of the most interesting aspects of the book is the place of China as a source of ideas for East European elites.

The process of entanglement is less clear as we move further down the process. While it is clear that policymakers were informed of events elsewhere, we rarely see how those charged with implementing the policy at a local level were entangled outside of their own locality. Paradoxically, the greatest problem seems to be that local actors were deeply entangled in their local communities and this seems to be a source of constant frustration for those in the center as this entanglement was blamed for the slowness of collectivization. One area that could have been explored is peasant connectivity; for example, Romanian authorities were concerned about events in 1956 in Hungary spreading to Hungarians in Romania. Likewise, the importance of rumors in rural society is clearly demonstrated by authors throughout the book but how they functioned or spread is less developed.

Collectivization and the Communist takeovers are seen as a year zero in terms of rural policymaking within the region, but as Nigel Swain points out in the concluding chapter, Communist policymakers were also entangled in the pasts of their own countries. It perhaps would have been useful to reflect on these entanglements with the past and in particular with agrarian policies of the interwar period and to examine how these policies had failed the poorest peasants and farmers rather than seeing collectivization in isolation from previous attempts to reform the countryside. However, such an analysis would have made the book overly long or alternatively would have watered down the analysis included within.

The editors argue that collectivization as a policy was intended to serve four very different

functions: as a central component in the economic modernization of the state; as part of Communist state building; in the centralization of politics; and in the remaking of the countryside, in particular rural power structures and social hierarchies. Reflecting on entanglements with the past, it should be noted that the first three components (modernization, state building, and centralization) had been at the core of thinking about the countryside since the nineteenth century. The idea of squeezing the peasantry to fund modernization through revenue from exports and provision of cheap food for the cities was not new.[1] Nor was recourse to violence against the peasantry by the state in order to extract this surplus.[2] Likewise, the issue of rural overpopulation, leading to diminishing land holdings and rural underemployment, was long recognized as one of the fundamental structural problems of the East European countryside, and a vital first step to resolving this issue was finding a mechanism to drain this surplus population from the countryside by encouraging mass migration either abroad or to the cities. Collectivization has to be seen in the context of another scheme by the state to modernize agriculture as a necessary precondition for “catching up.” The fourth function of remaking the countryside was where the Communists differed from their predecessors and has perhaps had the longest lasting impact on the countryside; it continues to be felt today long after the collectives themselves have been disbanded, reflecting the saying that “one can turn an aquarium into fish soup but you can’t turn fish soup back into an aquarium.”

For the Communists, the destruction of economic, social, political, and cultural peasant spaces—mill, market, tavern, all sites of peasant interaction—was central to the process of remaking rural society. One issue less discussed but critical to understanding peasant attitudes is that of access to common land for pasture and woodlands. Common land allows peasants to maintain some livestock that it would be impossible to sustain

otherwise. As Irina Marin has highlighted, the deliberate denial of access to common pasture and woodlands for Romanian peasants after emancipation led to a worsening of rural conditions and was one of the contributing factors in the 1907 Romanian peasant uprising.[3]

In the discussion of rural society the volume produces its most interesting insights but is also at its weakest. Reflecting on the area studies—disciplinary divide (in this case, rural history versus East European history), more use of rural historiography and sociology in particular would have deepened the analysis. Agriculture is often treated as homogenous and there is little attempt in the volume to explore how different forms of agriculture produce different economic and social relations and how this affected the dynamics of collectivization. The nature of geography means different types of farming are found in specific regions and helps to explain potential regional variations in the experience of collectivization. The consequences of this are remarked on, for example, in the context of Poland, where peasants who moved from the East to the newly gained western territories struggled to farm their new plots because they were not used to the different conditions in the West. As Mihail Gruev highlights in his chapter on Bulgaria, the Communists were aware of regional differences in forms of agriculture practiced, and hence collectivization varied between regions for precisely this reason.

Generally, the authors see rural society as stratified on the basis of economic wealth and landholdings and rarely consider other sources of stratification, such as social capital and generational divisions. However, the distinctions of rural society (who is a farmer, who is a peasant) are invariably locally defined and reflect the stratification of that area based on a number of different factors.[4] Land reform and collectivization introduced new forms of stratification. It was not necessarily the amount of land you held that reflected your social position but how you acquired

land, with those who inherited land having greater social status than those who had received land through redistribution programs. Village hierarchies were fuzzy and this fuzziness gave space to the arbitrariness of violence. The Communists defined the enemy as the kulak without ever defining who a kulak was, thus an enemy who was impossible to define allowed anyone to be defined as a kulak and to be targeted as an enemy.

The volume demonstrates the variety of techniques used by the Communists to try to force through collectivization: ranging from inducements to join, strategies of co-option, the range of coercive techniques from taxation, manipulation of land consolidation programs, through to physical violence. The book also does an excellent job in bringing out the various methods used by peasants to resist collectivization: the chapters on Yugoslavia and Romania emphasize episodes of peasant violence and insurgency, but more common tools of resistance echo the weapons of the weak identified by James C. Scott in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985) in an attempt to slow down or subvert collectivization. Likewise, the conflict was not necessarily peasants against the Communist state but frequently peasants against peasants, as those who joined collectives were subject to acts of hostility and even physical violence from those opposed to collectivization.

Perhaps the most important insight from the book comes in the exploration of the nature of peasant grievances against collectivization. These grievances highlight two issues: the relationship between land and the life cycle of the peasant, and the failure of collectivization to sit within the wider reform of state and society necessary to truly “remake the countryside.” Peasant complainants expressed their concern over the loss of control of land. They did so because land is critical at two stages in peasant life. First, land is necessary for a young peasant to be able to set up a

home: if parents cannot give land to their children, younger peasants will be driven from the countryside into the towns. This then gives rise to a second connected problem: if younger peasants leave, who will care for the elderly when they can no longer farm? This complaint highlights the failure to develop welfare provisions alongside collectivization in order to assume the social (rather than just economic) role of the peasant farm. It was not until the late 1950s that the regimes addressed this issue by granting pensions for peasants.

These minor criticisms aside, this collection is a vital contribution to our understanding of Communist rule in Eastern Europe. Its innovative approach and attempt to connect the individual states of the region while emphasizing the diversity of experience is to be commended. The attempt to adopt a holistic view of collectivization is warmly welcomed. Its insights also provide useful food for thought to wider discussions of attempts globally to modernize rural society in the twentieth century. Furthermore the writing is to be commended for its clarity and accessibility, making it highly suitable as a text for student use.

Notes

[1]. Royal Institute of International Affairs, *Agrarian Problems from the Baltic to the Aegean: A Discussion of a Peasant Program* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1944), 42. See also Ștefan Zeletin, *Neoliberalismul: Studii asupra istoriei și politicii burgheziei române* (Bucharest: Editura Ziua, 2005).

[2]. See Irina Marin, “Rural Social Combustibility in Eastern Europe (1880-1914): A Cross-border Perspective,” *Rural History* 28, no. 1 (2017): 93–113.

[3]. *Ibid.*, 109.

[4]. Robert G. Moeller, *German Peasants and Agrarian Politics, 1914-1924: The Rhineland and Westphalia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

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