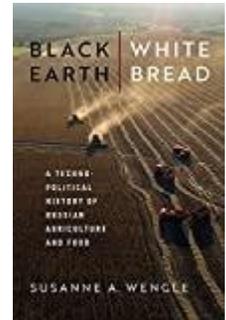


Susanne A. Wengle. *Black Earth, White Bread: A Technopolitical History of Russian Agriculture and Food.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022. 296 pp. \$79.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-299-33540-3.



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Black Earth, White Bread is a work that challenges you to think beyond the confines of your respective specialty and consider big themes in agricultural history and policy. Drawing on an impressive body of interdisciplinary scholarship, Susanne A. Wengle's new book narrates the story of Soviet and post-Soviet agriculture. She examines how Soviet and post-Soviet political regimes sought to fulfill the "promise of plenty" to their citizens within the frameworks of planned economy and state capitalism (p. 40). Wengle's goal is to show how food systems have functioned in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. In particular, she is interested in demonstrating how food systems change, what actors are at play in fostering these changes, and how global/local developments affect these systems.

Black Earth, White Bread argues that to understand changes in agriculture, one needs to examine the intersection of politics, technology, nature, and consumption, or what Wengle calls "technopolitics" in agriculture. As a methodological approach, technopolitics provides a framework

for scholars to understand how political actors rely on technology to "realize particular political goals and utopias" (p. 8). By using technopolitics, Wengle goes beyond the statist approach that favors the analysis of political decisions as key sources of change. Wengle asserts that agricultural projects' successes and failures become not only a consequence of policies and technological transformations but also a result of natural factors and consumers' decisions. All of the four "realms," as Wengle calls them, are interrelated, and "a change in one realm affects the others" (p. 8). The examination of this interdependence creates a more complex and, more important, dynamic picture of agricultural development and policymaking. Moreover, it shows the fragility and vulnerability of these relationships. In short, while technopolitics has been used in various studies, it has rarely been applied to the study of Soviet and post-Soviet agriculture. This allows Wengle to paint a new perspective on twentieth- and twenty-first-century agricultural policies in the region.

The book is organized into four chapters that correspond to the “realms” outlined in Wengle’s argument: governance, technology, consumption, and nature. Chapter 1 examines the role of political regimes and leaders in planning and implementing agricultural modernization projects in the Soviet Union and, later, Russia. Wengle perceives top-down transformations in the agricultural sectors and offers brief accounts of the New Economic Policy (NEP), Joseph Stalin’s collectivization, Nikita Khrushchev’s corn campaigns, Leonid Brezhnev’s policies, and Boris Yeltsin’s attempts to create yeoman farmers, in addition to Vladimir Putin’s support of agrohholdings. The goal of all these “revolutions,” according to Wengle, was more than simply extracting more “from Russia’s abundant land.” She argues that various political regimes used these modernization projects to show the “superiority of the Soviet and Russian political and economic order to their citizens and the world” (p. 35). While Wengle encourages readers to read chapters in any order they prefer, the first chapter provides important historical background for later chapters. Thus, it is advisable for those unfamiliar with the history of Soviet and post-Soviet agriculture to read this chapter first. The rest, as Wengle notes, can be read in any order.

Chapter 2 explains the history of Soviet/post-Soviet farm organization (collective farms, subsistence plots, agrohholdings, etc.) and traces technological shifts that took place on Soviet and post-Soviet farms. Wengle argues that these technological shifts cannot be understood without taking into consideration the exchange of knowledge, technology, and expertise between the Soviet Union/Russia and the Western world, especially the United States. Yet she is careful to point out that while the foreign influence played a significant role, one should not miss the importance of the local context in considering the implementation of new technology. Wengle’s insistence on keeping the intersection of the local and the global in mind is an

admirable effort to encourage scholars to consider both in their narratives of agricultural history.

The latter part of chapter 2 examines Putin’s agricultural policies and is particularly insightful and important for the contemporary reader. Wengle shows that before 2008, Russian agrohholdings imported foreign agricultural technology not only to modernize but also to become competitive on the global market. Returning the glory of Russia’s agricultural production was a part of Putin’s political mission, and agrohholdings were fulfilling a part of their bargain. However, after 2008, Putin’s regime changed the rhetoric toward “buying Russian” and relying more on domestic technology. While some sectors of agriculture could quickly shift toward domestically sourced technology, others had a harder time. It caused Putin’s regime to reconsider investment in agricultural research. Today, as Wengle shows, Russian research institutions receive more governmental assistance to boost the production of domestic technologies. However, the complete break with foreign technologies and knowledge is yet only a dream.

Chapter 3 focuses on changing patterns of consumption and food access. Wengle shows that Soviet and post-Soviet governments promoted different visions of consumption: from industrially processed foods, meat, and food prepared in public eating facilities during the Soviet period to the debate about domestic foods versus foreign foods in the last two decades. The implementation of these visions depended on the geographic location of a particular group, its economic and social status, and its cultural and ethnic background. Wengle notes that despite the attempts to fulfill the promise of plenty, each regime produced a stratified food system, thus failing to address equal food access for all citizens. Consumers, as she shows, tried to mitigate these problems through subsistence farming. However, despite the attempt to raise the consumer’s voice in this narrative, it remains somewhat muted.

The final chapter examines the interrelationship of humans and nature in agriculture by analyzing the breeding histories of two model organisms: wheat and pigs. The focus on wheat and pigs is not new, as Jenny Leigh Smith (*Works in Progress: Plans and Realities on Soviet Farms, 1930-1963* [2014]), Tiago Saraiva (*Fascist Pigs: Technoscientific Organisms and the History of Fascism* [2016]), and Courtney Fullilove (*The Profit of the Earth: The Global Seeds of American Agriculture* [2017]), to name a few, have used these subjects to demonstrate the intersection of the state, science, and the environment. Yet, in contrast to these scholars, Wengle underscores the role of environmental factors and the lack of harmonious relations between humans and nature, arguing that the previous scholarship gave too much credit to either human actors or the environment. In her view, food systems are based on the fragile “interdependent vulnerability” between humans and nature (p. 183).

This is a history written by a political scientist: for better and for worse. It greatly benefits from its focus on contemporary issues and policy but the balance of Soviet and post-Soviet narratives is tilted in favor of the latter. Historians may bristle at this, but I would encourage them to balance this against the significant contributions the text makes. By merging methodologies of political science, environmental history, history of science and technology, agricultural history, and food studies, Wengle offers a thought-provoking interpretive framework to study agriculture. The four realms that Wengle analyzes in her work help her answer many questions about Soviet and post-Soviet agriculture. More important, they will stimulate future scholars to apply this interpretive framework with a microhistorical approach.

For students and specialists unfamiliar with the history of Soviet and post-Soviet agriculture, *Black Earth, White Bread* is an excellent introduction to the topic. Wengle should be commended for her lucid prose and sharp analysis, as well as

the inclusion of several maps created by the author herself. For specialists, including historians of agriculture and scholars of science and technology studies, the author’s analysis of the post-Soviet period offers a multitude of illuminating points about the entangled relations of Putin’s government, national ideology, and agricultural production. It will be a welcome addition to the bookshelves of those interested in agriculture, food, science, and politics.

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