

The Collectivization of Agriculture in Communist Eastern Europe. Comparison and Entanglements. Edited by Constantin Iordachi and Arnd Bauerkämper. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014. 557 pp.

This collection of studies is the first attempt to discuss collectivization in the former socialist countries of Europe in a single publication. The time frame applied throughout the volume is not strict, but generally does not go beyond 1965. The volume brings together some of the most established specialists of the Eastern Bloc who are also active in the international academia.<sup>1</sup> According to the introduction, the book limits itself to a discussion of collectivization within the context of Sovietization. It seeks to go beyond the conception of Soviet power and state socialism as a one-way violent intrusion into normalcy. Moreover, one of the editors objectives was to establish a timeline. The collection of studies achieves this by adopting a methodology that addresses the criticism that has been raised regarding comparative methods by those that practice and theorize transnational history without, however, rejecting this criticism altogether.

The book is divided into four main sections. When deciding on the way to arrange the fifteen papers, the editors opted for a mix between geographical and methodological logic. The first section deals with the Soviet Union, including republics that came under Soviet domination during World War II. The second section examines the countries that are regarded by the editors as part of Central Europe. The logic of this division is not self-evident. The case of Hungary represents the complexity of the choices that one has to make if one seeks to group a country in one of the areas under consideration in the book. Such decisions ultimately rest on a distinction between countries (and cultures) that allegedly do or do not have enough in common with a group of other countries (and cultures) to be considered “in.” In other words, these decisions represent definitions of the “other.” “German historical scholarship has no issue with the classification of Hungary as a country of Southeastern Europe.”<sup>2</sup> Hungarian

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1 Namely, Lynne Viola, Nigel Swain, Melissa K. Bokovoy or Constantin Iordachi, professors working at the national level who have created schools, namely, Arnd Bauerkämper, Michail Gruev, József Ö. Kovács, Darius Jarosz and Jan Rychlik, and a younger generation of experts working in the region. In random order, they are Zsuzsanna Varga, David Feest, Dorin Dobrinu, and Jens Schöne. Örjan Sjöberg and Gregory Witkowski join this group as country specialists from Swedish and American academic circles respectively.

2 See e.g. Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Hitler's Foreign Policy 1933–1939: The Road to World War II* (New York: Enigma, 2005).

public opinion, in contrast, resents the idea of being put together with countries of the Balkans, such as Romania and Bulgaria. However, if one studies the entangled history,<sup>3</sup> the decision to group Romania and Hungary together may seem reasonable. To make things even more complicated, in the specific case of collectivization interaction between Bulgaria and Hungary is of importance in terms of policy design and outcome due to the expert group that was dispatched by the Hungarian leadership to Bulgaria with the explicit goal of making recommendations based on experience in the field. At any rate, Iordachi and Bauerkämper decided to group the GDR, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary under the heading “Central Europe” and Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania as “Southeastern Europe.” The fourth section of the book includes two papers that provide novel interpretative frameworks for the study of individual cases and two papers that were written with the goal of juxtaposing individual cases. Since methodologically these papers are the more adventurous of the fifteen and in this respect have a great deal in common with the introduction, they might have served the volume better had they been the opening essays.

The introduction, which is the joint effort of Iordachi and Bauerkämper, argues that there is a way to develop a methodology that uses both comparative methods and the idea of entanglement, and in fact the theme of collectivization in the Soviet sphere requires this. Following up on this thesis, in his contribution Arnd Bauerkämper argues that the manner in which Soviet collectivization was experienced and the manner in which the Third Reich was remembered influenced attitudes towards collectivization in the GDR, so they had a bearing on modes and practices of resistance against collectivization. In other words, the field of memory studies is not only relevant to the interpretation of collectivization because oral history interviews are important sources, but also because of the ways in which popular historical knowledge was changing as a result of interaction between personal memory, stories told by those who claimed to be witnesses, and propaganda. Zsuzsanna Varga also keeps the overall objective in mind when she applies a concept that political science has developed in recent decades: policy learning. She argues that collectivized agriculture became viable in Hungary because the government was capable of learning from experiences outside of Hungary and from local opposition and claims. Gregory R. Witkowski makes an effort to emphasize the aspects of collectivization that made its negotiated

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3 For the term “entangled history” see Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison: Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity,” *History and Theory* 45 (2006): 30–50.

nature visible. He explicitly puts himself among revisionist historians who do not accept totalitarianism as a valid interpretative framework and emphasize the possibility of historical agency. It must be taken into account that with regards to Poland, Bulgaria and Romania, his archival material mostly comes from the US State Department, thus, events narrated were filtered through multiple lenses and translations. Moreover, authors of the reports cited were in all likelihood delighted when they came across anything that could be understood as a sign of popular resistance. In the closing essay of section IV and of the volume, Nigel Swain hits a reflective tone. He is critical of his own work published in the 1980s,<sup>4</sup> in which he characterizes Hungary as a unique example within the Soviet zone in terms of deviation from the ideal type. He emphasizes that the relationship between ideal type and practice was a complex one in each country, despite the textual form of the ideal type, i.e. Stalin's Model Charter. Relying on the wealth of material and information with which contributors provided him, he points out six areas in which comparison and a study of entanglements look feasible. These are: the policy context of land reform; available resources; the concept and figure of the *kulak*; campaigning techniques; and peasant responses. The studies that make up the volume are efficient and effective in addressing each of these, with the exception of the failure to provide a clear picture of the post-war policy context in terms of the availability of food and the sustainability of pre-war structures.

The Country level case studies that make up the first three sections do not follow a uniform structure or methodology, but they are more than a series of disconnected essays with similar titles. On the one hand, each of the papers demonstrates persuasively that measures and waves to collectivize derived from decisions taken or assumed to be taken in Moscow. Contributors were unable to track this process in the documents available to them, but the similarities of the timelines serve as indirect evidence. On the other hand, the papers are written from a perspective from which the local context of violence, coercion, and contest for victory, language and meaning is visible. They attempt to answer questions about the rhythm and internal logic of collectivization, as well as the relationship between the dynamics of internal party struggle and agricultural policy. They all emphasize that post-war rural societies faced a triple burden: famine following the war and the occupation, compulsory deliveries in order to

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4 Nigel Swain, *Collective Farms which Work?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

avoid famine, and collectivization, which disrupted social and economic frames and was coupled with punitive measures.

There are two cases in which collectivization did not become a major constituent of state socialism. In the case of Yugoslavia, Melissa Bokovoy does not explain away the reversal by dwelling on the Soviet-Yugoslav relationship. Instead, she writes of widespread and violent resistance that bore the potential of rekindling the culture of violence that had emerged during World War II and reviving or reinvigorating ethnic divisions, thus threatening Tito's plans for the regime. Turning to Bokovoy's assumption about the weight that Soviet relations carried in policy outcomes, one may hypothesize that Soviet leadership appreciated both the strategic importance of Poland and the extent to which the population internalized its hostility towards the Soviet Union and did not regard it as possible or prudent to indulge in any behavior that might provoke a wrathful response. In his paper, Dariusz Jarosz avoids giving a comprehensive argument about why Soviet leaders accepted that Poland definitively gave up on full scale collectivization. He emphasizes the importance and extent of the territorial changes that reshaped Poland in 1945. He argues that the cleavage between hereditary farmers and newcomers (refugees) was the most important factor in explaining why the northwestern areas were the only ones in which collectivization took place on any significant scale. However, one may argue that the so called 'Type 1b collective can hardly be regarded as a collective at all.<sup>5</sup> The narrative that Iordachi and Dobrinicu establish for the case of Romania shows that internal struggle among communist leaders, violence and violent resistance do not suffice to explain outcomes in the case of collectivization. Romania experienced instances of open, if localized, revolt, as well as the longest-lasting collectivization efforts and cultural struggle concerning notions of desirable social stratification, yet the regime implemented collectivization and the transformation of rural society, as a result which the Socialist Republic was indeed born. The transformation did not bring about improvement in material conditions. On the contrary, by the 1980s Romania was one of the countries where food shortages were persistent, both in rural and urban areas.

József Ö. Kovács's study stands out, as it outlines a broader social history of the functioning of the collectivized rural world. In addition to explaining

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5 Miklós Mitrovits, "A lengyel kollektivizálási kísérlet sikertelensége: okok és következmények" [Failure of the Attempt to Collectivize in Poland], in *Állami erőszak és kollektivizálás a kommunista diktatúrában* [State Violence and Collectivization in the Communist Dictatorship], ed. Sándor Horváth and József Ö. Kovács [(Budapest: MTA BTK ITI, 2015), 335–48, 337.

different phases, stressing (like most of the studies in the volume) that post-war land distribution measures were irrational in economic terms, and recounting how discriminative taxation, compulsory requisition and imprisonment were linked and served as tools with which to force people and families into cooperatives, he also includes age composition and various indices of quality of life to show the depth of the changes that occurred as a consequence of collectivization. He argues that as a result of the changes arising from collectivization, rural society experienced structural exclusion in terms of social and material capital.

Taken together, these papers address questions pertaining to the location of power and violence in a region that remained peripheral on a global scale in the time frame under consideration. If one goes beyond the notion that the communist regimes were the outcome of the presence of armies and illegal moves to take power, one starts to raise questions about what was particular and typical about the ways in which power was used and how it was related to various imageries of modernity at various levels of politics and local communities in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Moreover, have specific entanglements produced a specific political anthropology or responses to the presence of power? The questions of collectivization provide fertile ground for answers to such questions, since discussion of the events has to involve a narrative about economic relations and reform initiatives before 1945, long-term changes, the social imaginary within and about peasant society, the role of violence in post-war conditions, and the changing scope of state administration.

Of the authors, Lynne Viola is perhaps the most effective in explaining how collectivization was fundamental for state building in the Soviet Union. She goes so far as to state that this was indeed the meaning of all of the violence and change, and economic, political or class aspects were secondary. David Feast's paper is particularly interesting from this perspective, since the focal points of his inquiry, the Baltic countries, were at the frontier of the Soviet Union during and immediately after World War II. It was a region in which, on the one hand, state building was a necessity from the regime's point of view, but it also fell in the zone where tactics of a popular front government had been used in 1944–47. On the other hand, the frontier nature of these areas meant that population movements carried information and knowledge across political borders. As in the case of policy implementation and the politics of history, here too entanglements turn direct and emerge as one of the defining features of the former Eastern Bloc. With regards to junctures of modernity and discourse as a factor in modifying practices of repression and social and political structures,

the case studies on Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria are particularly revealing. Both countries had some tradition of collective farming and pre-war land reform. However, while Czechoslovakia was one of the most agriculturally developed countries of the region, Bulgarian farmers had extremely scanty resources. Gruev argues that collectivization in Bulgaria not only involved state violence in the form of absurd and discriminatory taxation that made life impossible and mass imprisonment and execution following uprisings and open resistance, but also triggered an avalanche of marginalization in localities that squeezed peasants to such an extent that rural culture and society disappeared within three decades. Jan Rychlík argues that due to the substantial differences that remained between Czechoslovak forms of collective farms and Soviet kolkhozes, widespread resistance never reached the level of uprising and indeed by the 1970s had won a large measure of acceptance. He also stresses the importance of the implications of the changes in ownership patterns in areas where a significant proportion of the population was German speaking.

In summary, the collection of studies fulfills the objectives stated in the introduction. They show how efficient the comparative method and *histoire croisée* are in narrating collectivization as a major political venture and cause of trauma in the former Soviet bloc. They also reach out to the local level. However, it is worth reflecting on what other agendas are possible in the field.

The papers in the volume do not address the gender dimension systematically. Such a move might have shown contours of the region both vis-a-vis other peripheries (such as post-colonial areas and the so-called “West”). Viola has done extensive research on resistance among women, but her excellent essay in the volume does not keep gender at the center of her argument. Throughout the studies, we find cases in which women actively resist and cases in which an administration arrests women as a tactical move to weaken households in emotional and economic terms. We also see how male heads of household would cite the stubbornness of the women in their lives as an explanation for not joining the party. However, the inclusion of standpoint theory as a methodological approach would have enabled a richer interpretation of work, labor, food and welfare and would have shed some light on the relationships between these aspects and the location of power during collectivization.<sup>6</sup> József

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6 Martha Lampland emphasizes that the drive to bring women into wage labor was fundamental for the idea of the socialist body politic and for socialist modernity, including in the rural zone. See “Unthinkable Subjects: Women and Labor in Socialist Hungary,” *East European Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1990) and Martha Lampland, *The Object of Labor. Commodification in Socialist Hungary* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).

Ö. Kovács's broader social history, which considers gender as one of the axes, points in this direction.

Considering that Constantin Iordachi has recently edited a volume concerned with the historical and human geography of the Danube Delta, it is surprising that none of the studies consider collectivization from an environmental history perspective.<sup>7</sup> The ecological impact of policies of Sovietization and related changes of the landscape are at least as under researched as collectivization. However, related monographs, such as the work of Arvid Nelson and that of David Blackburn dealing with the GDR and Germany as a whole respectively indicate how questions of ecological sustainability and practices of power related to land can be discussed in a common framework.<sup>8</sup>

The volume is Eurocentric to the extent that other areas of the world are hardly mentioned. Arguably, it ends up downplaying the importance of the Cold War. Varga mentions Chinese models and campaigns at the end of 1950s, but otherwise non-European experiences are confined to a few footnotes, in spite of the fact that Soviet–Chinese rivalry was one of the key aspects of the era in the years when the last vehement rounds of collectivization were launched in Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania and the GDR. There is no reference to Cuba, North Korea or Southeast Asian communist regimes, nor is there any discussion of how agriculture figured in Soviet Cold War strategies in North Africa and Western Asia. The question of institutionalized expertise and scientific knowledge does not arise simply because of the absence from the volume of ecological and global concerns.

The reader struggles to find a comprehensive terminology of collectivization and business/financial practices of collectivized farms. As the contributors to a collection of studies designed to practice comparative methods and study entanglements, the editors and contributors had to face the task of translating terminology. This question was especially salient in the case of defining types of collectives and tackling the contemporary discourse on “kulaks.” Regarding types, they opted to translate all terms into English, and this resulted in a mix of terms that at times lacks clarity. This is particularly disturbing in the case of Poland, where we do not actually see what Type 1b meant in practice or how

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7 Constantin Iordachi and Kristof Van Assche, eds., *The Bio-politics of the Danube Delta. Nature, History and Policies* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

8 Arvid Nelson, *Cold War Ecology. Forests, Farms and People in the East German Landscape 1945–1989* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); David Blackburn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water and the Making of Modern German Landscape* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

distant it was from “real collectives” classed as Type 2 or Type 3. While making an effort to create a political history of collectivization as a narrative in which peasant resistance plays a central part, the authors are insensitive to the small-scale economic history of the collective farms.

Notwithstanding the number of options left unaddressed, as the first comprehensive volume adopting a regional perspective, the book achieves much. It provides comparable country-specific timelines and highlights key aspects of the political anthropology of collectivization (such as resistance, responses to the notion of the “kulak,” and differentiation between contexts of central and local party administration). It brings together experts from various academic and geographic background and demonstrates clearly that collectivization is one of the most important fields in the study of the regimes under Soviet domination.

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