HSCE | Historical Studies on Central Europe

Historical Studies on Central Europe 5, no. 1 (2025): 140–144
doi.org/10.47074/HSCE.2025-1.08

Diversity within Socialist Agriculture

Introduction

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In East-Central Europe, socialist agriculture was created as an integral part of the process of Sovietization. From the late 1940s onwards, in parallel with the aggravation of the Cold War conflict, the Sovietization of this region accelerated, resulting in the large-scale implementation of the Soviet social, political, and economic model based on Stalin's conceptions. There were certain differences in the timing and methods of Sovietization applied by the different countries, but the supremacy of this model remained indisputable until Stalin's death.[1]

Stalin treated agriculture as an 'inner colony,' i.e., he subordinated its human and material resources to the interests of forced industrialization. This required a farm organization that ensured not only the concentrated extraction of peasants' income but also the control and discriminatory treatment of the agricultural population.[2] As a consequence, peasants were treated as second-class citizens.[3]

Stalinist agriculture was based on three pillars. The first of these was the Machine and Tractor Stations (MTS), which served as a channel for ensuring the state's supply of crops and maintaining political control over the countryside. The second pillar was the state-owned farm (sovkhoz). The third element was the artel-type collective farm (widely known as a kolkhoz).

According to the Model Charter of 17 February 1935, the kolkhoz was a community of people who were joint users of the nationalized land of a given settlement, and who shared their farming equipment and animals. From the communal land fund, a certain amount (ranging from a quarter to one-half of a hectare per kolkhoz family)

1 The following works provide insight into the changes in the definition of Sovietization and its use in research: Apor et al., eds, *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe*; Naimark, "The Sovietization of Eastern Europe," 175–97. On Sovietization of the Hungarian agriculture, see: Ö. Kovács et al., eds, *The Sovietization of Rural Hungary*; Varga, *The Hungarian Agricultural Miracle?*

2 Merl, "The Role of Agriculture in Soviet Industrialization," 3–22; Viola, "Collectivization in the Soviet Union," 49–77.

3 Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 48–79.

was allocated for personal use; this was called a household plot or a household farm. The members of the collective farm carried out the actual agricultural work jointly —within the framework of brigades and work teams—in return for which they received payment for this communal work. The kolkhoz was considered inferior to the sovkhoz because it was not the property of the entire society but of a smaller community or group. For this reason, the official ideological perspective was to view the kolkhoz as a temporary solution that would evolve into a sovkhoz over time.[4]

The Model Charter of 1935 remained untouched until 1969. This explains why, at the end of the 1940s, it was Stalin's original kolkhoz model charter that was exported to East-Central European countries together with the other elements of the Stalinist agricultural system. In the Spring of 1949, collectivization began in Romania, Czechoslovakia, Albania, and subsequently in Hungary. The Polish party leadership also started the process, but this underwent a more gradual transition. The only exception was the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Because of Germany's uncertain future, the Party leadership was advised by Stalin to delay collectivization.[5]

In all bloc countries, huge conflicts emerged between the communists, who were carrying out the collectivization, and peasant society. The reaction of the communist parties to peasant resistance was to make use of a growing and increasingly diverse toolbox of state violence. The consequences were disastrous: a mass exodus of labor, the loss of the security of production, a dramatic decline in output, persistent food shortages, and so on.

Stalin's death opened up new ways of dealing with the problems and correcting agricultural policy. All countries stopped their forced collectivization campaigns. But the period of de-collectivization lasted only a few years, and in 1955, collectivization was relaunched in East-Central Europe, except for Yugoslavia.[6]

This second wave of collectivization was interrupted in 1956 by the Polish workers' uprising and the Hungarian revolution. The experience of the 1956 Polish and Hungarian crises had a significant impact on Soviet policymakers, as they understood that the poor performance of the agricultural sector, fragmented by collectivization and persistent food shortages in both countries, had contributed to the build-up and eruption of social tensions.

When the Soviet leadership initiated the completion of collectivization in the late 1950s, it tolerated neither Yugoslavia nor Poland completing this task. Thus,

4 On the characteristics of the operations of the kolkhoz, see: Davies, *The Soviet Collective Farm*, 75–97; Wädekin, "The Soviet Kolkhoz," 95–116.

5 Swain, "Eastern European Collectivization Campaigns," 497–534.

6 Swain, "Eastern European Collectivization Campaigns," 497–534.

their agriculture continued to be dominated by small-scale farms. In contrast, those countries that resumed collectivization were allowed to modify certain elements of the Soviet model, such as dismantling Machine-Tractor Stations, abolishing compulsory deliveries (quotas), liberalizing kulak policy, and allowing for different types of cooperation.[7] Khrushchev also hoped that providing more room for maneuver to the satellite countries would help them meet their own food needs, rather than them constantly demanding grain from the Soviet Union. Khrushchev devoted exceptional attention to stimulating agricultural production due to economic competition with the USA, as captured in his slogan of 'catching up and surpassing' economic performance within twenty years (1960–1980), a policy that applied not only to industrial but also to agricultural production.[8]

Acting on the impetus from the Kremlin, the socialist bloc countries—except for Poland and Yugoslavia—resolved to complete the transformation of small-scale peasant farms into large-scale state and collective farms in 1958.

A rich literature has accumulated on the history of socialist agriculture, and after the change of regime, important new results were produced thanks to the liberation of archival research. Two volumes of studies in English bear witness to this.[9] At the same time, researchers have focused mainly on the origins of this phenomenon in the 1950s; much less attention has been paid to the subsequent decades.

The present thematic section responds to this deficiency. The authors look behind the 'socialist façade,' analysing the responses of different groups of farmers, their interactions with the authorities, and their changing lifestyles, among other aspects.

Many questions remain about the agricultural development of the two countries that were excluded from the final collectivization drive. In both Yugoslavia and Poland, small farms dominated, but agriculture remained part of the planned economy, which meant that pricing policy and investment policy favoured the development of industry. Similarly, although the majority of peasant farmers were allowed to continue individual farming, state farms coexisted alongside them, which the authorities considered models of large-scale agricultural production and favoured in every possible way, including through investment and social security policies.

Two papers deal with the agricultural development of the Slovenian areas of the former Yugoslavia. Marta Rendla gives an overview of the changing attitude of the communist authorities towards farmers and private agriculture. Her paper covers

7 Swain, "Eastern European Collectivization Campaigns," 497–534.

8 Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era*, 325–60.

9 Iordachi and Bauerkämper, eds, *The Collectivization of Agriculture*; Radu and Bundeanca, eds, *Countryside and Communism*.

the period from 1945 to the 1970s. Within this context, the other Slovenian author, Janja Sedlaček, presents an interesting case study. Her paper presents an example of a successful bottom-up peasants' initiative that started as a bold move, inconsistent with the ideological framework of the time, but supported by the authorities and legalized a few years later. Her analysis gives us a close-up of the individual, Simon Toplak, who played a key role in the initiative.

In Poland, too, small farms dominated, but alongside them were state farms, considered the most advanced players in agriculture. Researchers have barely dealt with them. Ewelina Szpak's paper seeks to fill this gap. Her paper outlines the history of State Agricultural Farms, but the focus is on the community of agricultural workers employed in them. For her analysis, she has used not only archival sources but also diaries, memoirs, and interviews.

In Hungarian agriculture, after 1956, a gradual, and at first hidden, departure from the Stalinist model began. This process did not stop with the completion of collectivization (1959–1961) but became more and more widespread in the years after 1961. One of the most important elements of this became household farming. While large-scale farms achieved good results in the highly mechanized branches of extensive crop production, household plots excelled in labour-intensive vegetable, fruit, and grape production, as well as in poultry rearing, egg production, pig farming, and calf rearing, etc.

A rich sociological, economic, and historical literature is available on household farming. Judit Tóth's article builds on this and examines the similarities and differences between the often-confused household and auxiliary farms.

All four studies indicate that the agricultural policies of individual countries within the socialist bloc cannot be considered homogeneous, and there have been significant changes over time. They also prove that these policy changes can be seen as a response to agricultural producers and their interactions with the authorities. Over time, the room for maneuver changed a great deal and multiple times; without presenting these dynamics, it is not possible to give a close-up picture of the everyday life of 'socialist agriculture.'

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