

Beyond the Socialist Sector

The Role of Small-Scale Production in Hungarian Agriculture during the Kádár Era

Judit Tóth

Independent Researcher, tothjudit321@gmail.com

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Abstract. In accordance with Soviet expectations, collectivization took place in Hungary by 1961, as a result of which large-scale production became dominant. The state party did not support for ideological reasons, but also tolerated small-scale production due to economic necessity. However, the literature primarily presents the agricultural history of the Kádár period, focusing on collectivization and established cooperatives, and there is relatively little mention of small-scale production. However, its importance cannot be neglected at all since it played a decisive role in ensuring that the total reorganization of agriculture did not result in a radical decrease in production.

After collectivization, household plots belonging to cooperative members could remain, and the types of farms created in this way accounted for about half of the small producers. Much less is known, however, about the other important group of small-scale producers, the auxiliary farms. What were the characteristics of the two farm types? Why did the authorities treat them differently?

From the beginning of the 1970s, despite the restrictions, small-scale production increased, which process was interrupted by the effect of the 1973 oil crisis. After that, the attitude of the authorities towards small farmers also changed. How? What measures signaled this change?

My study, therefore, basically has a dual purpose. On the one hand, I would like to give a comprehensive picture of small-scale production in Hungary and the relationship between the authorities and small producers. On the other hand, I would like to present the two main types of farms belonging to small producers: household and auxiliary farms.

Keywords: Socialism, small-scale production, Kádár era, Hungarian agriculture

Introduction

After Hungary became part of the Soviet Union's sphere of influence after World War II, the adoption and forced introduction of Soviet models began in all areas of life. The state party (Hungarian Workers' Party), established in 1948 after the nationalization of industry, considered it particularly important to eliminate the autonomous segments of the countryside, and the process included the collectivization of land still in private hands.

After the land reform was implemented in 1945, large estates ceased to exist, but the land remained predominantly in private hands. Peasant society, which was strongly divided according to the size of estates, was nevertheless very united in its attachment to the land and maintaining an independent peasant existence. In the era marked by Mátyás Rákosi, considered Stalin's best Hungarian disciple (1948–1956), the authority set out to eliminate private property in two waves (1948–1953 and 1955–1956), but despite campaigns that also involved violence, the expected results were not achieved. Collectivization satisfying the demands of the Soviet Union was only achieved under the leadership of János Kádár in 1961.¹

Hungarian literature presents the agricultural history of the Kádár era (1956–1989), primarily focusing on collectivization and the cooperatives that were established. Although in connection with the latter, household plots, which are organically linked to cooperatives, are usually referred to,² we know much less about the auxiliary farms that are often mentioned together with them.

The aim of this study is, therefore, to present this form of farming in comparison with household farming. How did it differ from household farming, and what were its main features? Who had auxiliary farms? Under what conditions and what did they produce? Why did the government try to mix these two types of farming? The study seeks to answer these questions, among others.

From small farms to small-scale production

The form of property and farming known as household farming had already become common in the Rákosi era. Members who joined the cooperative groups were provided with a small plot (0.14–0.28 ha; from 1953 on, max. 0.58 ha), which they could cultivate independently within the family framework. Although household farming was associated with many disputes—mainly regarding the size of the plots and the relationship with cooperative groups—its products, which primarily ensured the daily livelihood of families, played a crucial role due to the constant public supply problems characteristic of the era. Household farming, although actually belonging to the cooperative sector, still left the illusion of private property, the role of which was not negligible.

Even after collectivization was implemented (by 1961), plots allocated to cooperative members could remain as household plots, which played a crucial role in

1 Varga, “Three waves of collectivization”; Ö. Kovács, Horváth, and Csikós, eds, *The Sovietization*; Horváth and Ö. Kovács, eds, *Állami erőszak*; Galambos and Horváth, eds, *Magyar dúlás*.

2 Mihály Ivicz, for example, analyzes household farming in detail in his book, although auxiliary farms are only mentioned and he does not discuss them as an independent category. Ivicz, *Kisbirtok versus nagybirtok*.

ensuring that the total reorganization of agriculture did not result in a significant decrease in production.³ Household farms were also one of the main components of the form of farming known as 'small farms' that continued to exist alongside the dominant large-scale production. However, when mentioned as a separate category, there is usually little mention of the 'auxiliary farms' that also fall under the conceptual scope of small farms and which, like the household plots, contributed significant added value to the country's agricultural production as a whole.

Regarding small farms, a kind of conceptual uncertainty and inconsistent use of terms can still be observed in the literature to this day. This can perhaps best be eliminated by taking as a basis the statistical censuses of the time and the terms in the literature based on their processing.

One of the conceptual anomalies is that small farms and small-scale production are often synonymous. After the collectivization of agriculture, the term 'small farm' was clearly used to refer to cultivation associated with an individual-level, non-large-scale farm framework, which encompassed four farming methods. Of these, the first and most important was, of course, household farming by the members of the farmers' cooperative. Although not numerous, specialist farming cooperatives—typically those producing grapes or fruit—were also formed in addition to collective farms. Their members, in addition to engaging in certain common activities, mainly cultivated the land as individual household plots, forming the second group of small farms. Third, we must include the approximately 100,000 individual farmers who remained after collectivization and did not join the cooperative system.⁴ Last but not least, the statistics of the time listed the auxiliary farms of the non-agricultural strata of the population as the fourth category. This category primarily included the lands retained by workers and pensioners who had left agriculture and the endowed lands of workers of state farms and other organizations, but more

3 Initially, the authorities considered small-scale production within the framework of household and auxiliary farming as a temporary concession, mainly to offset the losses resulting from the production of large-scale production that had not yet become consolidated. However, from the beginning of the 1960s, the party leadership was not unified in its assessment of small-scale production, as the agrarian lobbyists wanted to make it a permanent element of socialist agriculture. The main stages of this process are described in Varga, "Mezőgazdasági reformmunkálatok."

4 An important and interesting research topic is the fate of farmers who were left out of the process of collectivization. Many were left out because they owned land that, for some reason, could not be integrated into the development of large-scale field farming. However, a crucial question is what happened to them after this: did they remain in agriculture, and if so, how did they manage to survive? The Rural History Research Group, jointly established by HUN-REN [the Hungarian Research Network] Research Centre for the Humanities and the Committee of National Remembrance, considers research into this issue, among other things, to be one of its tasks.

broadly, it included all those who, regardless of their occupation, engaged in any form of agricultural production, even if they only had a hobby garden.⁵

Using a kind of simplification, the statistics of the time also classified members of specialized cooperatives and farms run by individuals who had been left out of the collectivization process as auxiliary farms. They also provided an explanation for this, the reason stemming from the power/ideological consideration that “the most important layer, the data on the cooperative members of household farms of agricultural production, should be clearly available.”⁶ All this clearly shows that although household farms and auxiliary farms appeared side by side in many statements, the two categories never fell under, and could not fall under, the same assessment since there was a crucial difference in their relationship to property and the socialist sector. Since household farming included the production of cooperative members on land provided by the cooperatives, as well as the keeping of animals around the house, this activity was considered an integral part of cooperative production.⁷ The Act on Agricultural Cooperatives made it the duty of the managers of cooperatives to develop household farms as well. The fundamental difference is that, compared to household farms, families working on auxiliary farms did not have cooperative members. Therefore, farming was carried out on personally owned or rented land and equipment, in addition to another main occupation, possibly a pension, or less often by an individual farmer.⁸

The existence and maintenance of small farms were associated with a multitude of contradictions that affected their operating framework and limited their possibilities. At the same time, the party leadership, which proclaimed the primacy of common property, could not renounce what they produced despite objections arising from ideological considerations. One piece of contemporary literature self-critically stated that “the successes of large-scale production for a long-time distracted attention from the fact that many small farms collectively produce a significant amount of product.” The author also added that small-scale production was mainly relegated to the periphery of interest due to its nature, which was considered temporary.⁹

The underlying reasons, however, paint a more complex picture. The roots of the issue can, of course, be traced back to ideological anomalies since the basic

5 Oros, “A mezőgazdasági kistermelés,” 1217.

6 Oros, “A mezőgazdasági kistermelés,” 1217.

7 For more information on the specific symbiosis of large-scale farming and household farms, the products produced by the household farms, and their role in agricultural production, see: Schlett, *Stratégiai ágazat*, 73–76.

8 Household and auxiliary farms in the Hungarian agriculture (1984). <https://videa.hu/video/nagyvilag/haztaji-es-kisegito-gazdasagok-...-gazdasag-magyar-mezogazdasag-0q4LtmrF5va-jIpIE> (Accessed: 15 June 2024).

9 Oros, “A mezőgazdasági kistermelés,” 1216.

problem was—as Deputy Minister Imre Kovács¹⁰ put it—“whether small-scale production is at all compatible [with socialist principles and practice].” The Kádár regime, however, actually viewed increasing agricultural production, including the products of small farms, as a guarantee of “good political public sentiment.”¹¹ One of the components of this was that the activities of small farms provided families with additional income, which was also overlooked by the authorities since the system considered raising the standard of living to be one of the most important political aspirations in terms of its own legitimacy. Since the party-state considered the working class to be its main ally, it was also a constant concern that these additional sources of income should not exceed those of industrial workers. The restrictive measures affecting small farms partly stemmed from this.

However, the authorities initially considered the most important aspect regarding both household and auxiliary farms to be that these farms and the families operating them were almost completely self-sufficient in many products, including vegetables, fruit, meat, and eggs, thereby relieving the pressure on the central supply system.¹² In fact, small farms accounted for more than a third of agricultural production by 1976. However, when examining animal husbandry alone, the proportion was even higher, as they were responsible for a 60 percent share of pig farming and over 90 percent of small animal farming.¹³

From the 1970s, however, alongside self-sufficiency, commodity production became increasingly prominent, which was reflected in the terminology: the term ‘small producers’ appeared at that time. According to a contemporary statistical approach, however, the reason for the new name was that from then on, these farms were considered a ‘long-term category’.¹⁴ Examining the history of small farms in the Kádár era, the name change undoubtedly marks a boundary line, not only in an economic but also in a political sense, as a shift in approach occurred in the assessment of these farm types in the background. However, it must also be emphasized that the attitude of the authorities was fundamentally guided by economic necessity. At the same time, the new situation that emerged created a somewhat more favorable, freer, and more permissive atmosphere for small farms compared to the previous ones.

10 Imre Kovács was Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food between October 1975 and January 1984. History Database. Directory. Imre Kovács. https://www.tortenelmintar.hu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4797&catid=74%3Ak&Itemid=67 (Accessed: 14 March 2024).

11 Kovács, “A háztáji,” 38.

12 For more details, see: Juhász, “Agrárpiac.”

13 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 5. cs. 684. ő. e. 10 February 1976.

14 Oros, “A mezőgazdasági kistermelés,” 1217.

Small farms, which had been tolerated by the system for years, were initially subjected to restrictive measures, mainly to meet the labor needs of cooperatives and later to reduce incomes.¹⁵ Despite this, the production of household and auxiliary farms developed dynamically in the first four years of the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1971–1975) compared to the previous periods. The favorable process stopped by the end of the plan period, and a decline occurred in 1975. This was particularly noticeable in the field of animal husbandry, as at the beginning of 1976, the number of pigs was more than 1 million (1.1 million) less, and the number of cattle was 70 thousand less than a year earlier.¹⁶ The negative trend was due to the 1973 oil crisis and its ripple effect. The resulting increasing internal supply problems, as well as exports to both the West and the East, made increasing production a strategic factor.¹⁷

The shift in arguments for and against small farms, the change in perspective of power, and, more importantly, adaptation to the established economic situation were reflected in measures aimed at supporting small-scale production. This changed approach was already reflected in the law on the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1976–1980), issued at the end of 1975, which stated as follows:

“Household and auxiliary farms, as well as agricultural specialist groups, must be assisted with appropriate interest, with the machinery and tools necessary for production, and by maintaining sales security, so that they can make the best use of their production opportunities.”¹⁸

Due to the severity of the economic situation, at the beginning of the following year, on February 10, the Political Committee (PC) of the state party, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (HSWP), also discussed the main issues related to household and auxiliary farms. The Fifth Five-Year Plan, despite limited budgetary and investment opportunities in agriculture, counted on an annual growth rate of 3.2–3.4 percent. Under the given circumstances, the importance of small farms, which had been tolerated until then mainly due to their role in self-sufficiency and export, increased. An important aspect of this was the fact that one-quarter of agricultural fixed assets were owned by these types of farms.¹⁹ A census conducted in 1972 already showed that 40 percent of the farm buildings on small farms, the stables representing the greatest value, were unused.²⁰ This trend worsened further, as

15 Oros, “A mezőgazdasági kistermelés,” 1216.

16 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 5. cs. 684. ő. e. 10 February 1976.

17 Romány, “Az Agrárpolitikai Tézisektől,” 409–10.

18 1975. évi IV. tv. (XII. 24.).

19 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 5. cs. 684. ő. e. 10 February 1976.

20 Oros, “A mezőgazdasági kistermelés,” 1227.

the report submitted to the PC about four years later, which summarized the data for several areas—such as stables and wine cellars—reported a utilization capacity of only 60–70 percent. While there was plenty of potential in the fixed assets owned by small farms, replacing them completely with large-scale production equipment would have required approximately 150 billion forints. The time for ideological deliberations was over; the party leadership had no choice but to view and open up to small farms as internal resources. Thus, despite the fact that it was stated in a resolution at the PC meeting in question that they still considered it important that “the socialist features of agriculture as a whole should be strengthened” in order to increase the efficiency of farming “in addition to the further expansion of large-scale enterprises, we must exploit all the possibilities of household farming to the fullest extent.” They also emphasized that “Due to the changing social and economic circumstances, we must expect the gradual modernization of small-scale production. This is partly a condition for household production not to decline and for its attractiveness to increase among younger generations. In addition to providing varieties and materials with higher productivity, it is important to create the conditions for technical development.”²¹

Based on the instructions of the PC, in line with what was said at the meeting, the Council of Ministers also had to put the issue of small-scale production on the agenda, which, in its resolution issued in March, stated that “in addition to the primary development of large-scale agricultural enterprises and the strengthening of socialist features in their activities, agricultural production on household and auxiliary farms must also be supported—as a socially useful activity.” The significance of the resolution, therefore, primarily lay in the fact that household and auxiliary farms could move from the tolerated status that had existed for many years to the supported category. Taking into account the differences in principle outlined above in relation to the two types of farms, it is also important that the provision also mentioned that household and auxiliary farms must be treated uniformly in the future.²²

How the provisions of the PC or the Council of Ministers were implemented and the conditions under which household and auxiliary farms could operate prior to these always depended largely on the county, district, or local party committees, as well as the councils, but also on the leadership of the cooperatives. That is why it is also worth mentioning that in the report submitted to the PC, it was acknowledged that small farms were affected by excesses, and at the same time, it was stated that they expected the new regulations to reduce these. One area of such excess was taxation, so the PC decision also required the modification of the tax system, emphasizing at the same time that all this must be implemented in a way that “prevents

21 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 5. cs. 684. ő. e. 10 February 1976.

22 1006/1976. MT hat. (III. 16.); Varga, “Questioning.”

the generation of unjustified incomes.”²³ The background to this was the previously mentioned political viewpoint that the growth of industrial wages should not exceed that of agricultural incomes. The measures thus adopted involved the duality of the brakes that were applied arising from ideological objections and various concessions arising from economic necessity.

The political leadership considered it very important that the content of the resolution be given adequate publicity, or more precisely, that these newly adopted principles be the benchmarks in shaping public opinion. The basis for this was the article written by Deputy Minister Imre Kovács and published in the *Social Review* in March 1976, which provided a concise summary of the resolution of the PC and the Council of Ministers. In establishing the unity of perspective desired by the party, it was treated as a defining principle that socialist development “was not disturbed in any way by the fact that a part of agricultural products has come from small farmers since the socialist reorganization, up to the present day. However, if we had suppressed their production for any reason, the resulting shortage of goods would have caused disruptions in our supply and exports, ultimately in our economic development, and even in the political mood.”²⁴ The deputy minister’s words represent a kind of ideological resolution and retrospective self-justification of the policy pursued against small farms until then.

The appreciation of the situation of small farms is also indicated by the fact that the general agricultural census of 1972 also covered these farms, and thanks to this, for the first time, the party and other interested official bodies were able to obtain a comprehensive picture of agricultural production outside large-scale farms. The date of the statistical survey is also important, as it provides an authentic picture of the period before the oil price explosion. Although data were regularly collected on animal husbandry, a comprehensive census was not conducted until 1981, nearly ten years after 1972.²⁵

Although the 1981 survey was not as extensive as the one nine years earlier, it is essential to highlight that it provided a precise description of which households were considered small producers. Thus, based on area, those properties reaching 1,500 square meters (800 in the case of a garden, vineyard, or orchard), and, based on livestock, those having one large animal (cattle, pig, horse, sheep, goat, mule, buffalo, donkey) or at least fifty adult poultry, twenty female rabbits, or twenty bee colonies were classified as small producers.²⁶

23 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 5. cs. 684. ő. e. 10 February 1976.

24 Kovács, “A háztáji,” 38.

25 Oros, “A mezőgazdasági kistermelés,” 1218.

26 Oros, “A mezőgazdasági kistermelés,” 1219.

The two surveys, therefore, provide important data on small-scale production, and they also allow us to track the socioeconomic processes that indicate the most significant changes that took place in small-scale production. Based on these, it can be seen that between 1972 and 1981, the number of small producers decreased by 11 percent, while different trends were observed in the two main types of farms, as the number of household farms of production cooperative members decreased by 14 percent, while the number of auxiliary farms practically changed little. Translated into numbers, this meant that while in 1972, a total of 1,681,000 small-scale producers were registered, in 1981, there were only about 1,500,000. The number of people with a household plot decreased from 782,000 in 1972 to 674,000 in 1981, while the number of auxiliary farms decreased by only 11,000, from 752,000 to 741,000. In a breakdown that excludes branches of cultivation, the decrease in the land area held by small producers exceeded 20 percent during the nine-year interval under examination. The decrease was more pronounced in the case of auxiliary farms, as their cultivated area decreased from more than half a thousand (522) hectares to 296 thousand. It can be considered a huge result that, at the same time, this did not lead to a decrease in the value of goods they produced.²⁷

According to the report submitted to the Secretariat of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party on June 16, 1980, on the experiences of implementing the 1976 resolution of the PC, in 1979, the combined gross production value of household and auxiliary farms exceeded the 1976 level by 11 percent, i.e., neither the number of people participating in production nor the decrease in the land area had reduced the level of commodity production on small farms. The secretariat resolution prepared on the basis of the report declared overall that "the resolution of the Political Committee of February 10, 1976, strengthened the uniform assessment of the household and auxiliary farms, and its guidelines helped the implementation of the tasks." The resolution also added that "the consolidation of the financial interests of the producers and the improvement of the material and technical supply played an important role in achieving the results." As a general statement, it was stated that overall, the desire for production had increased in relation to household and auxiliary farms, but "the number of people setting up for commodity production has increased, especially among young people." Despite the supportive atmosphere, however, the authorities were unable to overcome its own limitations stemming from the ideological brakes. Since they believed that the production of goods on household and auxiliary farms was already occurring in order to increase incomes, they also formulated the following warning: "We must therefore ensure that the income level remains stimulating." In addition to the results, the report

27 Oros, "A mezőgazdasági kistermelés", based on the tables on pages 1219–1225.

also addressed problems, among which the further decline in the cow population and, in close connection with this, disruptions in feed supply were highlighted.²⁸

The party state's main measures affecting small-scale production

Although the 1980 Secretariat Report cited above still reported on the decline in the cow population and feed supply disruptions, several laws and decrees addressed the problem of declining cattle breeding after the PC Resolution of February 10, 1976.

As already mentioned, from the mid-1970s, the desire for pig breeding and fattening also declined sharply; however, the liquidation of the cow population on small farms was even more severe. The process accelerated in 1974–1975, mainly due to problems with feed supply, taxation, and sales.²⁹ It should also be added that the foot-and-mouth disease epidemic of 1972–1973 also caused serious damage to the cattle population; the resulting loss was estimated at around 2.5 billion forints.³⁰ All this was important because a significant percentage of the export base came from small-scale production. It is no coincidence that the Fifth Five-Year Plan, issued in December 1975, also specified a vigorous increase in the number of cattle as an important goal and also stated that “cow keeping on household and auxiliary farms must be supported more intensively.”³¹ To this end, serious steps were taken in 1976, and at the end of the year, a joint decree of the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Agriculture and Food was published, which stipulated the financial support for cow keeping on household and auxiliary farms.³² It should be noted that the subsidy established in the regulation, i.e., 2,500 forints for the first cow and 5,000 forints per cow for the second and subsequent cows, was a significant amount, given that the gross average wage in 1977 was 3,413 forints.³³

28 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 7. cs. 609. ő. e. 16 June 1980.

29 Romány, “Az Agrárpolitikai Tézisektől,” 408–9.

30 Mészáros and Soós, “A ragadós száj- és körömfájás,” 705. We have not escaped the European epidemics of 1952–1954, 1964–1965, 1968–1969 and 1972–1973. However, foot-and-mouth disease has not occurred in Hungary since 1973. Since then, more than fifty years later, just as the study was being prepared, the highly contagious disease reappeared in Hungary in the spring of 2025. Mészáros and Soós, “A ragadós száj- és körömfájás,” 698.

31 1975. évi IV. tv. (XII. 24.)

32 “For applications submitted by household and auxiliary farms after January 1, 1977, a subsidy of forints 2,500 shall be paid for the first cow, and forints 5,000 for the second and each subsequent cow.” 53/1976. (XII. 29.) PM–MÉM sz. együttes r.

33 Central Statistical Office. Summary tables (STADAT). 2.1.1. Economically active, gross average earnings, real earnings (1960–). https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_hosszu/h_qli001.html (Accessed: 18 September 2024).

One of the main obstacles to the growth of livestock farming was the problem of feeding. For example, the 1980 report prepared by the Economic Policy Department of the Heves County Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party directly stated that "a continuous supply of feed is not ensured."³⁴ The situation, therefore, painted a very serious picture, not only in this county but also nationwide, which is why it was important to take stock of existing resources and make the most of the opportunities. Thus, the 1976 Council of Ministers resolution stipulated that "the executive committees of the councils should ensure that the grass crops of ditch banks, flood protection embankments, and other unused grasslands are utilized, or that cattle farmers can receive this crop free of charge."³⁵

The Council of Ministers' resolution did expand the possibilities of purchasing feed, but sufficient feed to supply the growing number of animals could only be provided by hand with enormous work and investments of energy. Small-scale farms could, therefore, only become more efficient if they also invested in mechanization. However, despite the intention and even the sufficient money in the pockets of each farmer, in the late 1970s, it was simply almost impossible for individuals to individually obtain a machine.

The Fifth Five-Year Plan Act already mentioned that household and auxiliary farms should be assisted with the machinery necessary for production so that they could make the most of their production potential.³⁶ After this, the 1976 PC decision also stated that "the gradual modernization of small-scale production must be taken into account due to changing social and economic circumstances." It was also added that "this is partly a condition for household-type production not to decline, and even for its attractiveness to increase among younger generations. In addition to providing varieties and materials with higher productivity, it is important to create the conditions for technical development." They believed that during the Fifth Five-Year Plan period, it would be necessary to provide various small machines worth about 1.5 billion forints.³⁷ The Council of Ministers decree issued following the party decision also stated that "in order to promote agricultural production in household and auxiliary farms, measures must be taken to meet the needs for small machines arising in the Fifth Five-Year Plan period."³⁸ The ministerial decrees, based on political will and theoretical guidelines, primarily provided support for the purchase of

34 MNL HVL XXXV. 22-c. Végrehajtó bizottsági ülés jegyzőkönyve. 1980. november 11. [Minutes of Executive Committee, 11 November 1980.]

35 1006/1976. MT hat. (III. 16.)

36 1975. évi IV. tv. (XII. 24.)

37 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 5. cs. 684. ő. e. 10 February 1976.

38 1006/1976. MT hat. (III. 16.)

garden tractors and various small machines for household and auxiliary farms.³⁹ These measures, therefore, did not yet extend to the purchase of higher-power machines and two-axle tractors, although the demand for them from small producers was already there at that time.

If we browse the classified ads of the most important rural press organ, the weekly newspaper *Szabad Föld*, we can see that, for example, ‘wanted’ type ads for the MTZ 50 tractor appeared in the paper as early as 1977. The following year, in 1978 and then in 1979, the number of both ‘wanted’ and ‘offered’ type ads increased dynamically, which extended to other large machines in addition to tractors: advertisements appeared for the sale of plows, lawnmowers, and farm trailers, which are also essential for transportation.⁴⁰ It is, therefore, clear that the state party’s permissive policy towards household and auxiliary farms fell short of meeting the demands of small producers. The purchase of tractors and associated machinery by private individuals was not yet permitted in the late 1970s; however, such transactions—although outside the legal framework—took place in negligible numbers, as the above-mentioned classified ads also confirm. The real economic processes, therefore, were ahead of the legislators; a legal gap was created, which was only resolved at the beginning of 1980. The importance of the issue is clearly indicated by the fact that measures were taken about the use of vehicles by private individuals—including the purchase of tractors by small farmers—within the framework of a Council of Ministers decree.⁴¹ Pál Romány,⁴² then Minister of Agriculture and Food also noted in a later article that although the possibility had already been available since 1980, “the acquisition was more difficult than the licensing.”⁴³

In the resolution of the Secretariat of June 16, 1980, while the turnover of small machinery in the past period, which exceeded 1 billion forints, was satisfactorily acknowledged, the difficulties with purchasing individual tools and the fact that the growing demand for small gardening machinery with internal combustion engines could not be met from domestic production and that there were few small-capacity

39 53/1976. (XII. 29.) PM–MÉM sz. együttes r.

40 Classified ads. *Szabad Föld*, 1977–1979.

41 3/1980. MT r. (II. 6.).

42 Romány Pál, dr. (Szajol, 17 November 1929 – Budapest, 16. December 2019). Pál Romány was the head of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food between 4 July 1975, and 27 June 1980. For a detailed biography, see: National Directory. Pál Romány. <https://magyarnemzetinevter.hu/person/650882/> (Accessed: 14 April 2024).

43 Romány, “Az Agrárpolitikai Tézisektől”, 401. The difficulties in procurement were essentially due to the fact that the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), established in 1949, required member countries to specialize in the production of certain products. Under the division of labor thus established, Hungary stopped producing agricultural machinery, among other things.

transport vehicles, was highlighted. The document even referred to the significant volume of imports from capitalist countries, but upon reading between the lines of the resolution, it is clear that there was not enough stock available to meet the demand for various tools, and even more so for machinery. Despite the shortage of machinery, the creators of the resolution also perceived the increasingly pronounced demand:

“There is a strong desire, especially among the younger generations involved in production and the urban population, to make work easier and to modernize small-scale agricultural production.”⁴⁴

The key to the effectiveness and success of a livestock auxiliary farm also lay in how it could solve the mechanization problem. In the midst of procurement difficulties, the role of informal ties and personal relationships came into play with great importance since even the machinery discarded by the cooperatives and state farms was not always easy to obtain. The individual expertise of the farmers proved to be indispensable for operating the machines, which were often purchased as wrecks. It was almost impossible to obtain a completely new machine, as the owner of an auxiliary farm at the time stated, confirming the words of the Minister of Agriculture just quoted: “It was an exception and required a lot of investigation.”⁴⁵ In the case of a small producer, the purchase of a new machine, therefore, represented an absolute novelty since both domestically produced and exported machines were primarily used to satisfy the needs of state farms and cooperatives.

The different characteristics of household and auxiliary farms

Based on the processes outlined so far, we can compare household and auxiliary farms according to three aspects: in addition to the mechanization of the farms, it is worth examining the method of feed procurement and the extent of commodity production as the output of these two methods.

The proportion of mechanical equipment and tractors was already greater on auxiliary farms in 1972.⁴⁶ The reason for this was that the mechanical needs of household farms were largely met with the machines of the cooperatives, while the auxiliary farms remained much more dependent on themselves in this respect. If they wanted to prosper or even grow, they were forced to handle the tasks that required machines themselves.

The level of mechanization of small producer farms developed only very slowly

44 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 7. cs. 609. ő. e. 16 June 1980.

45 The memoirs of István, a farmer from Heves County.

46 Elek et al., *Családi kisgazdaságok*, 83.

despite the increasingly permissive political climate. A 1987 survey based on the family budget and production statistics of agricultural small producers included 8,642 small producer households whose members owned some land. The survey also covered the equipment of the farms and found that “out of 100 non-hobby small farms, one had a two-axle tractor in 1986, two had a garden tractor, seven had a motor hoe, two had a universal garden machine, and two had a milking machine.” Understandably, this led to the conclusion that the farms were poorly equipped.⁴⁷

Promoting the mechanization of small producer farmers was also essential for an efficient feed supply. According to established practice, “the basis of small-holder livestock farming was feed produced by large-scale farms,” but the amount of self-produced feed continuously declined, in 1983 being about half that of the previous ten years.⁴⁸

Those with household plots received or could receive an annual crop allowance for the maintenance of their animals after their land was included in the cooperative, which meant both a form of security and dependence. There were no cooperative members among the families operating the auxiliary farms, so this option was not available when it came to purchasing feed. Thus, similarly to mechanical work, the auxiliary farms were more self-reliant in this area. This created a more challenging situation, but solving this with ingenuity and creativity set these farmers on the path to strengthening their independence and encouraged them to find solutions.

A 1977 county party committee report already pointed out that in terms of animal feed, “the available by-products represent a favorable condition for the development of cattle and sheep breeding.”⁴⁹ Later, a resolution issued by the HSWP Secretariat also stated that “attention should be drawn to the use of by-products, locally found so-called waste materials, that can be well utilized in household farming.”⁵⁰

For example, the owner of an auxiliary farm in Heves County used his personal connections to obtain the chaff that would otherwise have been thrown away from the local mill, from which the sifted grains could be used to feed the animals. Another important source of feed was another industrial by-product, sugar beet slices, which could be obtained from the nearby sugar factory. When ensiled, these slices provided food for the cows for a longer period of time.

In many cases, economic necessity led auxiliary farms to seek innovative solutions, which may have played a decisive role in enabling them to become

47 Burgerné et al., “A mezőgazdasági kistermelők,” 4.

48 Oros, “A mezőgazdasági kistermelés,” 1226.

49 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 7. cs. 534. ő. e. 10 October 1977.

50 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 7. cs. 609. ő. e. 16 June 1980.

more effectively involved in commodity production. According to a 1975 Central Statistical Office report, while the gross turnover of household farm goods exceeded that of 1970 by 35.5 percent, that of auxiliary farms showed much more dynamic growth of 129.4 percent.⁵¹ Comprehensive research on small-scale agricultural production conducted between 1976 and 1977 also pointed out that “among household and auxiliary farms, the former is the stagnant-regressive form of farming, and the latter is the dynamically growing form of farming.”⁵²

In this regard, three important facts concerning the auxiliary farms of the period should be emphasized. As has been mentioned several times, the commodity-producing activity of small farms was noticeable from the first half of the 1970s, but within this, the tendency and desire for commodity production, as well as the number of people setting up to do this, increased, especially among young people.⁵³

On the other hand, specialized commodity production was more typical of families that had a family member in an industrial occupation, as opposed to traditional peasant households.⁵⁴ It was also observed that specialized commodity production economies developed among auxiliary farms, especially in the field of animal husbandry.⁵⁵

The most dynamic development was therefore expected when a young farmer working full-time in an industrial plant started producing goods. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the Council of Ministers’ resolution, mentioned here several times, issued in March 1976, also emphasized that “the involvement of wage earners (including the younger generation) in agricultural production activities must be promoted.”⁵⁶ Based on the data from the 1972 census, it can be seen that small-scale production was typically carried out by the older generation, specifically those aged sixty and above, i.e., pensioners. Only 7.2 percent of those under thirty were engaged in small-scale farming in 1972, and only 5.5 percent in 1981. It should be added that during the nine-year period, the number of small-scale farmers decreased among those aged over thirty and forty, while only those over fifty increased in proportion—by more than 7 percent. It is also important to note that in the indicated period, the number of those engaged in small-scale farming in addition to active gainful employment increased by 3.2 percent among those whose main occupation was not agriculture.⁵⁷ Overall, therefore, by the beginning of the 1980s, the majority

51 Elek et al., *Családi kisgazdaságok*, 83.

52 Varga, “Tudományos életünk,” 69.

53 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 5. cs. 684. ő. e. 10 February 1976; MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 7. cs. 609. ő. e. 16 June 1980.

54 Elek et al., *Családi kisgazdaságok*, 83.

55 Oros, “A mezőgazdasági kistermelés,” 1217.

56 1006/1976. MT hat. (III. 16).

57 Oros, “A mezőgazdasági kistermelés,” 1222–23. Figures based on Tables 4 and 5 on the indicated

of small-scale farmers were no longer members of the farmers' cooperative but were instead industrial workers and employees.⁵⁸

Only one of the dual objectives of the Council of Ministers' resolution was thus achieved since, even if to a small extent, progress was made in involving wage earners in agricultural production activities, but this effort apparently proved less effective with the younger generation. The root of the problem is also clearly indicated by the already mentioned 1983 statistical work, which stated:

"The younger generation generally does not undertake production using traditional peasant methods, and they can only count on the further development of small-scale production if they have the opportunity to replace manual physical work with machine work."⁵⁹

As discussed in detail, there was a huge lag in the supply of machines, which could only be offset by humans over time.

One of the most interesting questions among researchers studying small-scale production in the Kádár era is how much time and overtime were required for small-scale producers to operate their farms. According to the working time balance for the entire economic year 1972/1973, the average working time of households dedicated to household and auxiliary farms was four and a half hours per day. However, the survey also indicated that 55 percent of the working time was spent by women and 61 percent by pensioners and dependents.⁶⁰ On a livestock auxiliary farm, this was typically distributed in such a way that the structural operation of the farm and the mechanical work were the responsibility of the head of the family, but the additional activities of female and retired workers played an indispensable role in daily tasks. Being a small-scale producer typically required overtime, after the eight-hour working day, for the head of the family. Therefore, it was not an easy fate for those who undertook small-scale production, particularly regarding maintaining a commodity-producing auxiliary farm. This could mainly only be achieved by those farmers who had a strong love of the land, respect for traditional peasant life, and an attraction to it.

Primarily citing the interests of increasing food production, both implicitly and in order to maintain the legitimacy of the system, the party leadership was therefore forced to commit itself to the development of small-scale production from the second half of the 1970s onward. Proceeding on this principle, they also envisaged further improvements in the material and technical conditions of production

pages.

58 Varga, "Mezőgazdasági reformelképzelések," 228.

59 Oros, "A mezőgazdasági kistermelés," 1236.

60 Oros, "A mezőgazdasági kistermelés," 1221.

during the period of the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1981–1985).⁶¹

However, the development of commodity-producing auxiliary farms was not only hindered by the factors listed above. They could only move forward if they had access to their own or rented land, but given the “legally limited individual land use,”⁶² this solution encountered serious difficulties. It was only with the Land Act issued in 1987 that somewhat greater freedom of maneuver concerning the land issue was achieved.⁶³

Conclusion

The issue of small-scale production in the Kádár era has so far been mostly addressed by sociologists—István Márkus, Pál Juhász, Iván Szelényi and Imre Kovách—who typically approached the topic from the perspective of social mobility in their writing.⁶⁴ However, less work has been done to explore the characteristics of the two main economic types associated with the concept of small-scale production and how household and auxiliary farming differed. Although politics made the difference between the two categories very noticeable in practice, the constant mention of the concepts together in many respects seemed intended to conceal their different developmental characteristics. As part of the propaganda of the time, political actors tried to insinuate that domestic small-scale production “differs qualitatively and in content from small-scale commodity-producing economies operating under capitalist production conditions.”⁶⁵

Comparing household with auxiliary farms, however, it is clear that the latter farming method was more similar to Western small farms in many respects. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the authorities tried to lump the two types of economy together, often mixing them up.

The three areas that are examined (mechanization, feeding, and commodity production) clearly support the claim that during the socialist period, “despite all the differences, there was a type of farm, the family small farm, which in many elements and characteristics [was] similar to the part-time small farms of developed market economies.”⁶⁶ This type of economic operation was the auxiliary farm. Although the discussion of this issue clearly requires further research, it can be stated as an important

61 MNL OL M-KS 288. f. 7. cs. 609. ő. e. 16 June 1980.

62 Burgerné et al., “A mezőgazdasági kistermelők,” 4.

63 1987. évi I. tv. (IV. 3).

64 For an excellent summary of this, see: Kovách, “Polgárosodás.”

65 Kovács, “A háztáji,” 41.

66 Elek et al., *Családi kisgazdaságok*, 83.

conclusion that, in relation to the small-scale agricultural production of the Kádár era, the two forms of farming with distinct characteristics—household farming and auxiliary farming—can be clearly distinguished. Although the findings in the study point to the roots of the differences, it would be worthwhile expanding the research in the future—even through case studies—and looking on a broader basis at the extent to which, and in what aspects, there were similarities between the small farms operating under a capitalist framework and the auxiliary farms in Hungary.

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