HSCE | Historical Studies on Central Europe

Historical Studies on Central Europe 5, no. 2 (2025): 322–326
doi.org/10.47074/HSCE.2025-2.18

The Last Peasant War: Violence and Revolution in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe. By Jakub S. Beneš.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025. 400 pp.*

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The author's first book, the original and innovative *Workers and Nationalism*,[1] set high expectations for his second one. The former exposed the dialectic between proletarian internationalism and workers' nationalism in *fin-de-siècle* Bohemia, convincingly presenting both as reactions to the essentially middle-class and broadly liberal nationalisms of the era. It showed how German and Czech workers could both ostentatiously put their brotherhood on display at outdoor political events and scuffle with each other in pubs. In a restrained polemical tone, it pointed out that balanced individual bilingualism was rare in real life and that in "German" places like Teplice (Teplitz), the division between native speakers of German and Czech was fraught with the connotations of local versus immigrant. While socialist propaganda successfully promoted proletarian internationalism as an antidote to divisive nationalist strategies, the network of socialist institutions simultaneously worked to emancipate the working classes, integrating them into national high cultures modelled on the ideal of *Bildung*. The bourgeois press denigrated the socialists as cosmopolitans without a fatherland, but the argument that the toiling masses were the true representatives of both nations could prevail by the time of the suffrage movement of 1905–1906.

This second book now turns to the peasants of East-Central Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, re-examining their agency in the cataclysmic changes that are usually assumed to have simply happened to them. Its primary focus is on the Czech, Croatian and Slovene lands, where Beneš can rely in part on his archival research, but it also covers other lands that belonged to Habsburg Austria until 1918, as well as Ukraine and European Russia. The narrative spans an arc from resistance

* Funded by the European Union (ERC, BENASTA, 101076237). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

1 Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism*.

to the command economy of World War I to resistance to state collectivisation in the 1950s. The Green Cadre, gangs of armed deserters in war-torn Austria–Hungary who emerged from hiding after the collapse of state power to uphold peasant grievances and try to put the peasants' ideas of a just society into practice, occupy an emblematic place. Blending egalitarian goals, pacifism and class-based internationalism with a heterodox and traditionalist version of nationalism, as well as anti-urban and often anti-Semitic sentiment, the Green Cadre embodied the radical, disruptive side of peasant politics. From there, Beneš leads the reader through the short-lived peasant ministates of 1918–1919, social banditry, the ambivalent integration of irregular military units into new, national armies, to the interwar agrarian movement, the partisans of World War II and resistance to the forced collectivisation of land. A separate chapter is devoted to each of these, with the story of the South Moravian Slovácko Brigade illustrating the fate of peasant militias in the successor states and the Slavonian "Band of Mountain Birds" used as an example to tell the story of the descent from brigandage with a cause to simple banditry.

The book's most ambitious aim is to refute Marx's quip in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* that the peasantry was as incapable of articulating its own class-based politics as a sack of potatoes and instead portray it as an autonomous actor that shaped the modern world. This included the withdrawal of Russian peasants from the front in their hundreds of thousands, which sealed the fate of the Kerensky government; the mutiny of peasant soldiers in Radomir, which overthrew the rule of Bulgarian tsar Ferdinand; widespread peasant unrest in Croatia, which made the Croatian political elite dependent on the Serbian army and indirectly paved the way for a centralised (as opposed to a federal) Yugoslav state; and the anti-Bolshevik backlash in the Russian and Ukrainian countryside, which forced the Bolsheviks to abandon the war economy and introduce the NEP. However, peasant politics also took on a more respectable, orderly aspect in the interwar period. In addition to agrarian parties from Bulgaria to Croatia, the book also analyses the workings of the Prague-based Green International and even uncovers a link between the Green Cadre and the influential, heterodox peasant Marxism of Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh via the figure of Tomasz Dąbal, the head of the Komintern-aligned peasant international, the Krestintern.

The book is theoretically lean in not making much of a statement about its conceptual apparatus, but it often captures peasant action through the anthropological lens of James C. Scott, especially the concept of the moral economy of peasants. It prominently features Gramscian thought and references Eric Wolf, though other classics on peasants and peasant violence, such as those of Guha or Redfield, whose work could otherwise sharpen its message, are missing.[2]

2 Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony*; Guha, *Elementary Aspects*; Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture*.

According to Beneš, the apocalyptic years of World War I set off a sea change in peasants' attitudes towards politics. The absence of most men from the fields itself turned the economy of peasant households on its head, and, as if that were not enough, the wartime government adopted the command economy from Germany, with regular inspections of barns, the mandatory selling of grain and maize to "grain offices" at low prices, while the prices of consumer goods experienced runaway inflation. The dramatic increase in state power put a chokehold on peasant livelihoods and clashed with peasants' moral economy, just as the traumatic confiscation of church bells in 1916 stripped the emperor, who traditionally embodied the state in the eyes of the peasants, of his sacred legitimacy. The attack on grain offices, "spontaneous requisitions" carried out on behalf of locals, and bloody acts of revenge against gendarmes, foresters, and other lower state representatives reveal the backlash that such policies caused and the rejection of the central power by the rural masses.

While I agree with Beneš's autopsy of the dynamics at work here, my findings from researching Romanian peasants in Dualist Hungary contest his rigid chronology. Not denying that wartime developments accelerated the process, the more piecemeal but still radical state penetration of the preceding decades, the steep rise in taxes, and the expansion of bureaucratic rules had already put pressure on rural people, which often gave rise to violence. In particular, everything that Beneš has to say about gendarmes as the most omnipresent and visible representatives of state power—from the fear and hatred they inspired among peasants to the attacks on gendarmerie posts—can also be documented in *fin-de-siècle* Transylvania. Judging by Stefano Petrungaro's excellent monograph, state-sponsored modernisation led to similar resentment in the pre-war Croatian countryside.[3]

In the later years of the Great War, villagers' desperation and growing hostility towards the state brought local solidarity and survival strategies to the fore and gave popular support to the gangs of deserters collectively known as the Green Cadre. In Austria–Hungary, the 'Greens' could most easily find networks of accomplices among the rural population of Croatia and Slavonia, eastern Moravia, western Slovakia and western Galicia, identified by Beneš as the hotbeds of peasant unrest. In fact, most "Greens" camped near their home villages, frequently changing their exact location to avoid being captured but returning home as often as possible for food, fresh clothes and a warm bed. However, such "home boys" mixed in the same gangs with other deserters who came from other Habsburg provinces and spoke other languages. The total number of the Green Cadre was estimated at two hundred and fifty thousand in the Habsburg Empire in October 1918.

3 Petrungaro, *Pietre e fucili*.

The former prisoners of war from Russian captivity, who joined the Greens *en masse* in 1918, had a major influence on their political ideas. Many of these returnees took to the woods as they were confronted with the prospect of being politically vetted and locked up in one of the re-education camps run by the Common Austro–Hungarian Army, only to be sent back to the front. They spread news of the Russian revolution among Habsburg peasants, fleshing it out with their own eyewitness accounts. It must be stressed that what they had experienced first-hand in Russia was a countryside view of the early days of revolutionary euphoria after the Bolshevik takeover in St. Petersburg, when locals took matters into their own hands and set about redistributing land. While slightly misleading, such an outlook electrified the agonised rural masses of Austria–Hungary, who then combined this with a vernacular understanding of national self-determination, a cornerstone of anti-Habsburg nationalist propaganda in 1918.

Often styling themselves after the haiduks and other outlaws that romantic nationalist mythology had transformed into social bandits and national freedom fighters, Green Cadre forces came to the fore in October 1918 in their attempts to push through fundamental social change and lay the groundwork for a system they called "republican"–popular government based on participatory democracy and local autonomy, a political system organised from below, for and by the people understood primarily as agriculturists. They had no intention of abolishing private property, but they proclaimed the end of large estates, seized and dismantled manors, and turned a blind eye to, or even participated in, the looting of shops, because they saw shopkeepers as war profiteers. They would sometimes exploit the rumours about an alleged conspiracy by Queen-Empress Zita against the monarchy to playfully invoke the imperial couple as their protectors. Beneš concludes that the involvement of the Greens amplified the revolutionary ambitions behind collective violence.

Beneš dwells on the actions and reactions of peasants in this chaotic, transitional period because they reveal aspirations and a political imaginary that endured in the long term and were also shared by the constituency of interwar agrarian politics. They were by no means specific to landless labourers, since smallholders who had suffered relative deprivation during the war, actually played a more prominent role in the violent post-war restoration of the moral economy.

This political imaginary and this understanding of social justice found their embodiment in the small peasant republics that sprang up during the 1905 Russian revolution and in 1918–1919. They emerged from popular assemblies, confiscated neighbouring landed estates, refused to pay taxes to imperial centres and organised self-defence. However, Beneš specifies that not all ephemeral statelets of these years were, in his sense, peasant republics, even when peasants participated in their

leadership. The Hutsul and Lemko republics, for instance, were "republics *by* peasants but not clearly *for* peasants" as "their primary aim was nationalistic" (p. 130).

Perhaps the greatest merit of Beneš's book is connecting the dots between spontaneous postwar revolutionary action and interwar agrarian populism, thereby showing the latter's popular roots. This link is often overlooked because the former Green Cadre irregulars who pursued political careers in the successor states toned down their social radicalism, and agrarian parties in general shifted towards the political mainstream. Some of their main ideological planks, however, can be traced back to the ideas underlying peasant action in the immediate postwar years; e.g., the devolution of powers, pacifism, international cooperation (often with Pan-Slavic overtones) and primarily the belief that democracy inevitably assigned a leading role to the peasantry, as the demographic majority. More significantly, Beneš argues that peasants continued to act on similar ideas as they were forced to regain agency during the later upheavals of World War II and Soviet-style collectivisation campaigns. In fact, Beneš opens the horizon at the end of his book, explaining how the latter fit into global patterns of peasant political attitudes.

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