

## Conference Report

### **“The Collectivization of Agriculture in Communist Eastern Europe: Comparison and Entanglements from the 1930s to the 1980s”**

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*supported by*



The workshop on “The Collectivization of Agriculture in communist Eastern Europe: Comparison and Entanglements from the 1930s to the 1980s”, which took place in the *Berliner Kolleg für Vergleichende Geschichte Europas* (BKVGE) on 4 and 5 July 2008, was the second in a series of two conferences which assembled experts in the collectivization of agriculture in Eastern Europe and its various dimensions. Whereas the first conference, which had taken place in Budapest on 22 and 23 June 2007, was devoted to the discussion of the comparative framework of the consortium, the Berlin workshop aimed at finalising the contributions to the envisaged volume on the topic.

As *Arnd Bauerkämper* (BKVGE) and *Constantin Iordachi* (Central European University, Budapest) emphasized in their introduction, the conference was to discuss the streamlining and revision of the manuscripts, which had been circulated before the group of scholars convened. Moreover, the texts had to be harmonized. The participants were also asked to identify gaps in the contributions and give ideas for cross-references. Not least, chronologies, which are to be integrated in the volume, had to be discussed and streamlined.

Based on this agenda, the two conveners identified important overarching issues which had to be addressed and analysed. Apart from the role of the Sowjet “model”, cleavages and conflicts that had preceded collectivization or resulted from this process were to be discussed. This applies to ethnic and social conflicts as well as to the contrast between centres and peripheries and between the elite and the rural populations. Moreover, the choice of specific approaches (e.g. the perspectives “from below” or “from above” as well as national, regional and local levels) has to be reflected and elaborated upon. Not least, the comparative framework and the focus on entanglements will tie the envisaged volume together. The participants were therefore asked to pay due attention to mutual or unilateral influences as well as to the

relationship between indigenous and exogenous factors. As regards comparison, similarities and differences are to be identified and explained.

The first part of the conference dealt with dimensions of collectivisation. Following the structure of the book project, this was followed by case studies on certain countries. *Lynne Viola*'s (University of Toronto) presentation on "The Soviet 'Model' and Types of Collectivization" opened the discussion. Emphasizing the role of the Soviet collectivization in the processes of state building and social-economic modernization, Viola highlighted the peculiarities of collectivization in the Soviet Union as well as legacy of Russian traditions and overriding concepts of enforcing state rule such as "social engineering". Lynne Viola was asked to distinguish between different visions of modernity on the part of specific actors. Moreover, Soviet collectivization is to be related more strongly to the collectivization processes that proceeded in Eastern Europe after 1945. Not least, the character and interpretation of collectivization in the USSR (as an "experiment", "model" or colonising venture) is to be specified in more detail.

In his overview of a wide range of collectivization processes in Eastern Europe, *Nigel Swain* (University of Liverpool) argued that "class conflict" in the first stage of collectivization was usually followed by "class collaboration" in its second phase. Distinguishing between types of collectivization in different East European countries, Swain specified the preconditions and particular political frameworks of collectivization. In the discussion, the "Soviet model" was conceived as a "moving target", which was usually selectively appropriated according to the prevailing conditions. Swain was also asked to specify the particular impact of collectivization on the consolidation of state socialist regimes. Moreover, the respective processes of collectivization are to be placed into the overall context of migration and urbanization. Swain was also asked to spell out his usage of certain terms like "socialization" and "kulak". In particular, the relationship between the retrospective construction and contemporary usage of these terms is to be spelt out.

*Arnd Bauerkämper* (BKVGE) presented a paper on the role of historical narratives and competing memories as sources of agency in the collectivization of agriculture in the GDR. Highlighting the impact of different memories on the conflicts about collectivization, Bauerkämper emphasised the dynamics of competing versions of history in the largely enforced merger of farmers and peasants. Yet the concept of "memory" aroused some criticism. In particular,

Bauerkämper was encouraged to replace “memory” by “remembrances”. He was also asked to explicitly deal with language, with a view to the distinction between discursive and practical knowledge. Not least, the relationship between memories and party propaganda as well as the role of localized memory has to be elaborated upon.

In his contribution, *Gregory R. Witkowski* (Ball State University, Indiana) argued that the rural population in the periphery adopted and appropriated central initiatives and directives according to the particular needs and local conditions. In his comparison of the GDR, Poland, Bulgaria and Rumania, Witkowski linked the collectivisation of agriculture to social dislocation and migration from peripheral areas. Apart from the geographic divide between the capitals and the hinterlands, the metaphorical gap between local and national identities and interests were strongly emphasized. In the debate, the role of the local officials as mediators between centre and periphery received particular attention. Moreover, Witkowski was asked to distinguish between different “peripheral” areas (e.g. counties, districts and provinces). The impact of regional traditions on the collectivization processes in the four countries will also have to be specified. Most importantly, the dynamics of collectivization changed the relationship between centres and peripheries. This process accentuates processes of centralization and decentralization. Overall, the conceptions of “centre” and “periphery” do not only require theoretical underpinning, but they also need to be placed in their respective contexts.

Opening the section on different countries, *Örjan Sjöberg* (Stockholm School of Economics) reconstructed four major waves of collectivization in Albania from the late 1940s to the early 1980s. Apart from its protected nature, collectivization in the mountainous Balkan state was characterized by the wide variety of geographic conditions, the considerable population growth, the large scale of relocation in the villages during the 1950s and the political emphasis on autarky, in particular. Sjöberg related his chronological overview of collectivization to specific types of collectives and emphasized that Albania largely rejected de-Stalinization. Taking up the latter observation, discussants asked Sjöberg to explain the ambivalent role of Soviet collectivization in Albania. Moreover, he was encouraged to elaborate upon the impact of Chinese collectivization on developments in Albania. The policy of autarky as an overall framework and the legacy of deeply-rooted traditions like the semi-feudal system as specific features of collectivization in Albania are also to receive closer attention. Altogether, the source base of the contribution has to be broadened.

In her presentation of collectivization in Yugoslavia, *Melissa Bokovoy* (University of Mexico, Albuquerque) highlighted the interactions between officials and peasants. Combining political and social history, Bokovoy argued that the clashes between central party and state directives and peasant culture led to a wide scope of contradictory interactions resulting in distinguishable “learning curves”. In the debate, the role of peasants as social actors (as distinct from mere objects of political rule) was stressed. Moreover, the impact of monitoring commissions and agricultural specialists will have to receive more attention. Some discussants also wondered whether there was a Yugoslav “model” as distinct from a Soviet “model”. Finally, the relationship between internal and external reasons for abandoning collectivization in Yugoslavia is to be specified, especially with regard to different stages of the process.

The second day of the workshop continued with additional presentations of national case studies on collectivization in Eastern Europe. The discussions were chaired by *Arnd Bauerkämper* and *Luminita Gatejel* (BKVGE).

The regional campaign of collectivization in Eastern Europe was preceded by the first wave of post-1945 collectivization in the recently annexed provinces in the USSR. This first experiment in Soviet-style collectivization was very important in setting a precedent and a standard to be emulated in Eastern Europe, in general. In his paper and presentation, *David Feest* (University of Göttingen) proposed a first comprehensive comparative analysis of the process of collectivization in the Baltic States. Feest addressed two main analytical questions in relation to the history of collectivization in the three countries under discussion: Why was agriculture not collectivized immediately after their incorporation into the Soviet Union in July 1940 or after their reconquest in 1944? And why was there such a rush and pressure to collectivize in 1948–1950? Feest argued that these issues cannot be understood without taking into account the organizational problems the Soviet power faced in the attempts to subject the small republics. Moreover, the ideological means they used to conceptualize these problems and the way they fit them into interpretations of the experience of the late 1920s and early 1930s, when agriculture was collectivized in the old Soviet republics by mass terror and deportation have to be taken into account. His main argument was that although collectivization had economically proved to be a failure in the old Soviet republics, it nevertheless fulfilled important political functions. While in the first years after seizing power there were good reasons not wanting to rush collectivization, by 1948 the interior as well as

external situation had changed so drastically, that the Soviets chose to push for violent collectivization. In the discussion, Feest was asked to differentiate between the Baltic states and spell out more explicitly the contexts of the first wave of collectivization.

*Dariusz Jarosz's* (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw) presentation focused on the collectivisation of agriculture in Poland, providing an argument about the specificity of collectivization in that country. Why did the process fail? Why it was abandoned? Jarosz rejected the proposition that has credited the peasantry with a heroic resistance against collectivization. Instead, Jarosz emphasized the ambivalent attitude of the Polish elites toward collectivization and their relationship to Moscow, drawing particular attention to Gomulka. He also referred to the important role that religion in general and the Catholic Church in particular played in Polish society and politics. In the discussions, several colleagues highlighted the link between policies of colonization and national consolidation in Silesia, on the one hand, and the abandonment of collectivization in Poland. Others inquired about the types of peasant resistance in Poland in comparison with the Soviet Union. They also highlighted the need for more explanation in order to supplant the careful and informative reconstruction of events.

*Jan Rychlík* (Masaryk Institute, Prague) detailed the general and specific aspects of collectivization in Czechoslovakia. He presented a rich overview that took into account the long tradition of state farms and cooperatives in the Czech territory. During discussions, several colleagues expanded on the similarities and difference in the collectivization of Czechoslovakia as compared to other East European countries. They stressed the fact that Czechoslovakia was the most urbanized and industrialized country in Eastern Europe and asked how important was this factor was in the collectivization campaign. In his answers, Jan Rychlík also elaborated on the role of ethnicity in collectivization, in view of the specific experience of the Hungarian-dominated areas in Southern Slovakia. Not least, he hinted to the major regional differences in development between various regions in Czechoslovakia, such as between Bohemia and Slovakia, and their role in the collectivization campaign.

The second part of the morning session was devoted to collectivization in Hungary, with two complementary presentations by József Ö. Kovács (University of Miskolc), entitled “Collectivization as Social Practice in Hungary,” and Zsuzsanna Varga (ELTE, Budapest) on “The Appropriation and Modification of the Soviet Model: The Hungarian Case.” *József Ö. Kovács* provided a very detailed and informative overview of the process of collectivization in Hun-

gary, delineating several waves and stages in the campaign, identifying main actors, and accounting for major shifts and turns in the agrarian policy of the Communist Party. Based on a wealth of primary sources, most notably interviews with peasants that could provide eye-witness accounts of collectivization, and using the methodological tools of a social historian, Kovács argued that collectivization profoundly shaped Hungarian society, transforming entrenched peasant values and social attitudes. The discussions emphasized the need to re-organize the paper by differentiating between the overview of collectivization and its interpretation. The impact of the 1956 revolution on collectivization was also discussed.

*Zsuzsanna Varga* provided an issue-oriented analysis of the last stage of collectivization in Hungary, which took place between 1957 and 1962. Her contribution concentrated on the changing relationship between the political power and the rural society after the revolution in 1956. Varga concentrated on the question of how the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party tackled the task of collectivizing small farms after 1959. In her answer to this question, Varga focused mostly on the Communist Party's accumulation of expertise and change of policy in collectivization, which she called a "process of learning." On this basis, she advanced an important main argument, claiming that the roots of the Hungarian idiosyncratic but highly successful socialist agricultural system can be traced in the Communists' change of agrarian policy that occurred after 1956. Some discussants, however, detected a contrast between the introduction and the conclusion and asked what "learning" actually meant for Communist functionaries. Apart from internal discussions, their meetings with fellow-Communists in Moscow will have to be investigated in more detail.

In his presentation, *Constantin Iordachi* (CEU) provided an overview of the process of collectivization in Romania. He advanced several hypotheses as to why the process of collectivization of Romanian agriculture was so long and protracted, such as the enormous size of the agricultural sector, its economic importance, the weakness of the Communist party in terms of membership, political experience and legitimacy, and the rivalry among various leading factions. During discussion, numerous colleagues provided important comparative perspectives. The first one was between the case of Romania and Poland, mostly in relation to the size of the country and the importance of the agricultural sector. Why did collectivization succeed in Romania, whereas it was abandoned in Poland? The second comparative perspective was between Romania and Albania: In both countries, the Stalinist leadership survived attempts of political reformations. Moreover, both countries resisted Soviet attempts to institute a division

of labour in the Communist camp and pushed for forced industrialization. For these reasons, collectivization was of a paramount political and economic importance.

In the final session, chaired by *Arnd Bauerkämper* and *Constantin Iordachi*, the participants discussed important issues concerning the preparation of the final volume on collectivization in Eastern Europe. In regard to the final chronology, there was a consensus that a concise, but comprehensive and integrated regional chronology will be a major contribution of the volume to the existing research tools and resources on collectivization. The participants emphasized the need for further revisions of the existing drafts, harmonization of entries and their standardization. Another issue amply debated issue was that on the terminology employed in the volume. Many participants emphasized the need to differentiate between the political language of the time and the analytical concepts used by historians. It was recommended that each author provide as many key terms in the original language of their study as possible, explaining their specific meaning and their etymology. In addition, adequate translation in English should be provided as well as the closest equivalents in the Soviet political vocabulary (i.e: Romanian *chiaburi*, originating from the Turkish word *chibar*, equivalent in the official discourse to the Soviet term *kulak*). The need for harmonization of translation in English of equivalent terms was also emphasized (e.g. “forced requisition”, “collection quotas”, “mandatory quotas” etc.). The participants were also encouraged to include more explicit cross-references in the contributions to the volume which is to be published in 2009.