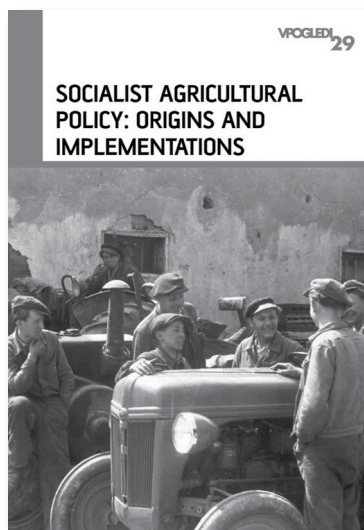


Ocene in poročila – Reviews and Reports

Janja Sedlaček, ed., *Socialist Agricultural Policy: Origins and Implementation.*

Ljubljana: Institute of Contemporary History, 2025, 274 pp.



The history of socialist agriculture and, more generally, the lives of Central and Eastern European rural populations under socialism are not topics that the literature ignores. On the contrary, accounts of collectivisation in the region abound, and some of the most insightful works on Soviet history focus precisely on the turbulent relations between Soviet authorities and the rural population. Nevertheless, comparative and entangled approaches remain scarce, which is one reason why the volume *Socialist Agricultural Policy: Origins and Implementation*, edited by Janja Sedlaček, is a valuable contribution to the field.

Based on the 2023 Conference of Rural History in Cluj, the book opens with a brief introduction by Žarko Lazarević. It comprises eight chapters presenting case studies from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia.

The volume is divided into four large sections. The first comprises two contributions by Stephan Merl on the history of socialist agricultural policies in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The first chapter focuses on the Soviet experience from the late 1920s until Stalin's death. Its primary claim is that Stalin's main drive was never the modernisation of the countryside, and that the Soviet leader's primary intention was instead to finance industrialisation, even in the face of clearly adverse results in the agricultural economy. In parallel, Merl engages in discussion with Lynne Viola concerning the characterisation of peasants' actions against Soviet power and contests the use of the concept of "resistance" to describe what, in his view, were desperate measures to survive the violence unleashed against them by the Soviet authorities. Merl's

second chapter is an extension of the first, with a broader focus on Eastern Europe after 1945. Drawing on evidence from Soviet, German, and Hungarian archives, as well as the secondary literature, this contribution examines agricultural policies in the USSR and Eastern European states from the postwar years to the end of socialism. By studying these two together, the author shows that the reception of Soviet guidelines for the countryside led to different forms of implementation across Eastern European countries. These diverging approaches, which resulted from the changing nature of relations between Eastern European communist parties throughout the second half of the 20th century and were shaped by local conditions and needs, also allow the author to critically assess Soviet policy and its limitations in light of alternative solutions to similar problems.

The following section of the book comprises two chapters, respectively dealing with Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and showing the manifold tensions and divergences that arose in the reception of socialist agricultural policies abroad after 1945. A chapter by Zsuzsanna Varga focuses on the reception, translation, and transformation of the Stalinist approach to socialist agriculture in Hungary, where successive changes from the late 1940s to the 1960s enabled the emergence of new and original forms of management and production in the countryside. The adoption of collectivisation in the late 1940s, reinforced by pressures arising from the Tito-Stalin split, led to negative outcomes, including resistance to joining collective farms and lower overall production. De-Stalinisation and Imre Nagy's ascent to the Hungarian Party leadership allowed a retreat from pressure to collectivise and a new boom in individual farming, which was interrupted by Rákosi's return to power. The arrival of Kadar led to significant liberalisation in the countryside, the abolition of compulsory deliveries, and a gradual return of market mechanisms in agricultural production; yet these changes were halted in the late 1950s by a third attempt at collectivisation, which met with resistance from Hungarian peasants. By the early 1960s, this led to the adoption of a more flexible and tolerant policy that accepted local initiatives diverging from the *kolhoz* model in the hope of increasing production, eventually expanding the autonomy of collective farms from the state, liberalising their internal functioning, and recognising household farms as an integral part of the system. By the late 1960s, the Hungarian socialist agricultural model had departed significantly from Soviet practices, a development made possible by Moscow's increased tolerance for divergences within the socialist bloc and by the Hungarian Workers' Party's need to secure its legitimacy after 1956.

In dialogue with Varga's chapter, Eduard Kubů and Jan Slaviček's contribution examines the singularities of the Czechoslovak case and reviews the evolution of socialist policies throughout the period of socialism in the Bohemian lands. Their contribution also sheds light on the plasticity of the reception of Soviet-style agricultural policy and its local implementation, a process also shaped by fluctuations in relations within the socialist bloc. The authors discuss the shift from a relatively tolerant approach to agriculture, with considerable room for small and medium-sized private ownership during the first months after the Communist takeover, to a more radical

approach after the Tito-Stalin split of June 1948, which aimed at the liquidation of private holdings and collectivisation, with poor results. Several years of fluctuation during the de-Stalinisation period eventually led to the adoption of novel policies aimed at making agriculture more efficient while narrowing the gap between the living standards of cooperative members and those of city workers. As the authors show, from then onwards the rural population in Czechoslovakia would enjoy rising living standards, eventually becoming one of the pillars of regime stability even during periods of political and social unrest, such as the late 1960s. Collectivised agriculture in the Bohemian territories would attain high levels of productivity and international integration, not least because the regime permitted enterprises to diversify and expand into other activities. Rural income would continue to grow until the very end of the socialist period, demonstrating the consistency and viability of agricultural policies developed by Czechoslovak authorities since the late 1950s, although often with utter disregard for the long-term impact of excessive chemical use, which allowed for increased productivity.

The third part of the book, dealing with forms of resistance and dysfunctions, opens with a contribution by Lev Centrih that sheds light on the local and micro-social dimensions of the failure of collectivisation in Slovenia. Focusing on the region of Ig around Ljubljana, Centrih draws on a variety of secondary sources and archival documents from Party and local authorities to reconstruct the manifold conflicts that plagued the implementation of collectivisation in an area deeply affected by political violence during World War II, and to trace the trajectories of cooperative members, showing their diverse and often opposing stances towards party authorities and collectivisation. A remarkable finding of this study is the extent to which, with only one exception (the peasant cooperative of Brest), class-based conflict among members of the cooperatives tended to be overshadowed by clashes of other sorts (religious, ideological, moral), showing how interpersonal tensions could beset the implementation of collectivisation as much as, or even more than, structural disparities in ownership.

The next piece, written by Márton László, examines attempts at collectivisation and anti-collectivisation movements during the early years of the Romanian communist regime, with a focus on the former Háromszék County in Transylvania. Drawing on both oral and archival sources, the author reconstructs the tactics used by the regime's officials to push peasants and landowners into cooperatives, ranging from simple social pressure and threats of expulsion from school for their children to hard labour and, eventually, physical mistreatment. The paper recounts many episodes of grassroots resistance against collectivisation in the towns, leading to clashes with the authorities, several fatalities, and numerous deportations.

The final section of the book, titled "Private and Collective", examines experiences of reform in the agricultural economies of Hungary and Slovenia, highlighting tensions between private and collective ownership. A chapter by Dániel Luka delves into the legislative process behind land reform throughout the 1950s and 1960s. This lengthy reform effort sought to align the evolving landscape of land use and distribution (also

discussed in Varga's chapter) with economic reform, culminating in the Land Act of 1967. Luka's analysis shows that the process largely coincided with the well-known fluctuations in Hungary's political landscape, with official approaches shifting from more repressive to more liberal phases and back over the years. However, somewhat unsurprisingly, the persisting goal was to reinforce common property ownership at the expense of private property.

Lastly, a chapter by Marta Rendla focuses on the reform of Slovenian agriculture in the early 1970s. The author begins by examining the initial approach of the Yugoslav regime to agrarian production and the rural population, which emphasised collective ownership, reinforced large agrarian combines, and contributed to a significant income gap between rural and non-rural populations; all of which eventually led to the decline of cooperatives and a general process of deagrarianisation. The official approach, however, changed in the late 1960s, when it became recognised that ensuring food security required the development of both agricultural ownership sectors. Consequently, technological modernisation, access to credit, farm specialisation, and education in advanced agricultural practices became equally accessible to private farmers, all with the support of the newly revitalised Agricultural Extension Service, which operated on three levels – republic, regional, and local – with the latter assigning a central role to cooperatives. By the end of the socialist period, and in line with official plans, Slovenia had achieved a high level of self-sufficiency in food production, around 82%, albeit with significant internal production imbalances.

Janja Sedlaček's volume offers a comprehensive overview of the development and implementation of agricultural policy in socialist Central and Eastern Europe throughout the second half of the 20th century. The authors effectively show the broad diversity of approaches that emerged among the leadership of European socialist countries during the Cold War, initially shaped by common guidelines emanating from Moscow but rapidly adapting to local circumstances and driven by the opening of possibilities following de-Stalinisation. The volume effectively shows the significant restrictions initially imposed on policymaking by the Soviet model, as well as the ultimate capacity of most Eastern European regimes to reinvent themselves in the face of repeated failures and to adopt novel, more flexible approaches and solutions to the agricultural question.

The volume is very well put together, with several lines of thought that link the contributions to one another and a shared interest in examining how the cooperative model was used to transform the countryside under socialism in Eastern European countries. On a more critical note, the reader notices that the chapters are sometimes uneven, with some offering rather general accounts of policymaking and others delving deeply into the national, regional, and local histories of Central and Eastern European societies. This imbalance notwithstanding, the volume stands out for its consistency and richness, offering readers an excellent review of debates on the history of socialist agriculture in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as a glimpse of the latest research in the field.

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