

Ö. József Kovács: *A paraszti társadalom felszámolása a kommunista diktatúrában. A vidéki Magyarország politikai társadalomtörténete 1945-1965* (The liquidation of peasant society in a communist dictatorship. Social history of rural Hungary 1945-1965). Budapest, Korall, 2012. 574 pages. Korall Social History Monographs 3. Includes an English-language summary, "Forced Collectivisation of Agriculture in Hungary, 1948-1961."

This study of Professor Ö. József Kovács is the first comprehensive attempt to interpret the forcible establishment of Soviet-style collectivised agriculture in Hungary. It is based on several years of archival research, including documentation from the Hungarian National Archives (MOL – Magyar Országos Levéltár), the Archives of State Security Services (ÁBSZTL – Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára), all Hungarian provincial archives and numerous personal interviews with survivors of collectivization procedures. The author interprets collectivization both as a social process and as a priority political objective of Communist dictatorship. This twofold approach enables the author to evaluate collectivization not only as a social historical process but also as an integral political instrument of the Communist dictatorship.

The author analyzes four specific elements of collectivization: socialism as a policy objective, the resistance of traditional structures to collectivization, industrialization and everyday experiences of peasants facing coercion and oppression. This approach documents not only the declared policies of the dictatorship, but based on 40 live interviews with participants illustrates the personal experiences and mentalities of those subjected to collectivization.

The starting point is the transformation of the year 1945 leading to the distribution of land to individual peasants under Soviet direction. This was actually the first step in collectivization. Land distribution favoured primarily landless agrarian wage-earners, domestic workers and peasants with dwarf holdings, so that these groups constituted 90% of those receiving land. As a result, a new social class consisting of beneficiaries of Soviet-directed land distribution was created. This class became the social basis of Communist party activities as well as of collectivization following the assumption of political power by the Communist Party in 1948. The policies of collectivization were prepared by a systematic campaign of propaganda, initially promoted as the policies of the Communist Party, then following the political takeover as official government policies.

The first phase of collectivization took place during the Rákosi regime, in the period 1949-1953. Although these policies were clearly targeted to social groups which had benefited from the land reforms of 1945 and violent methods of recruitment were utilized, party activists were able to enrol a total membership of 376,000 controlling only 26% of the country's cultivated land areas. In addition, as a result of out-migration, inefficient management, organizational coercion and land confiscation agricultural income was predominantly based on production in household plots. According to estimates cited by the author 70% of agricultural income in this period was derived from them. The dismissal of Rákosi and the appointment of Imre Nagy in 1953 as prime minister resulted in the substantial revision of agricultural policies. The number and membership of collective farms declined. During the Revolution of 1956 the decline continued at an even greater rate, resulting in a membership of less than 100,000 and control of 7.2% of the country's cultivated land areas by collective farms in December 1956. The author characterized this first phase of collectivization as "the history of an imported failure in Hungary and the waste of natural resources."

Following the Soviet intervention and the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution, the Kádár government did not intervene in agricultural matters in the period 1956 to 1958. There was a resurgence of agricultural activity in the private sector in these years. But a radical change took place in 1959. Preparations for renewed collectivization were made in 1958 as the regime became firmly established. In the spring of 1959 a national propaganda campaign was launched, mass meetings were held, and special party agents were dispatched to those rural communities which had been designated as targets of collectivization. The next phase was "agitation" in these communities: large numbers of party members, teachers, industrial workers were placed in selected locations with the mission of persuasion. This mission included eating-drinking parties, but in most cases more forcible methods as well. The basic objective was to break peasant opposition to collectivization.

It has been a generally accepted view that following the violent methods used in the Rákosi period, the Kádár regime, learning the lessons of the Revolution, used more refined methods of persuasion to obtain the peasantry's support. Until recently very little information was available concerning these methods. The research and analysis of the author confirm that these methods were not refined at all: they included verbal, psychological, administrative pressure and even physical violence. These sources also confirm the methods of organized violence and various forms of

resistance to it: flight from the countryside and demonstrations by women. The author characterizes these actions as “campaigns” and a form of “internal war” and substantiates his judgement with original party documents.

Another element of the collectivization campaign was propaganda and activity directed against religious organizations and influence. It was an integral policy of the Communist Party to diminish the influence of church schools and religious instruction in agrarian society. At the same time, this policy was not limited to church influence in rural Hungary, but was a national policy of opposition, criticism and defamation of church organizations, denominational schools and associations.

Collectivization was unable to address important social, economic and psychological issues that were a by-product of agricultural collectivization. These included the social, medical and retirement needs of elderly members. Another series of problems related to pockets of unemployment, labour force shortages and inadequate professional management. Official documents confirm that inefficient management, labour force organization and performance as well as badly chosen locations of collectivized farms were responsible for low production indicators. State subsidies were required to provide membership incomes comparable to those of private landholders. Traditional village society was disrupted, the peasantry lost its devotion to agricultural pursuits as well as to the village community's traditions and customs. These psychological impacts are observable in contemporary Hungary both in rural and urban communities.

Ö. József Kovács's study attained its objective. In addition to preparing an excellent scholarly study, the author has made a contribution to a better understanding of our society, of our social history as well as of a significant traumatic social process. In his concluding chapter the author provides a convincing summary of his study and recommends future research to evaluate the process of impoverishment resulting from property confiscations in agricultural collectivization.

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