

Exposing the Destruction of the Hungarian Countryside

Galambos István – Horváth Gergely Krisztán (szerk.): *Magyar dúlás: Tanulmányok a kényszerkollektivizálásról*. MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont – Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága, Budapest, 2019. ISBN 978-963-416-185-1, 228 pp.

Dániel Farkas

KRE BTK, Doctoral School of History, Budapest, Hungary

This volume of 11 papers on the state-socialist transformation of the Hungarian agrarian sector is an important and thorough investigation of this tragic process in the history of this Central European country. Hungary underwent two waves of ideologically supported and politically motivated restructuring of its rural life and economy in the 1950s and early 1960s. One of the strengths of this book, which built up from smaller scientific pieces, is that the different authors independently verify the core facts of this period. The book is structured in two layers: the first is the regional study of collectivization, in which the Eastern, Central and Western parts of the country are represented in a total of eight papers. The other three parts represent a comprehensive approach without a specific examination of a given agricultural area – a summary of the collectivization process by József Ö. Kovács, the description of the relation of the churches to the collectivization process by Viktor Attila Soós and the examination of the Kádár-era sociographies of the countryside by Gergely Krisztián Horváth. All of these describe the two-faced nature of land distribution from March 15 1945, when the new law enacted by the Communist forces caused the destruction of the traditional property structure of the Hungarian countryside. It caused the destruction of the profitable great estates without creating stable new group landholders – instead it built new patronage systems around the leaders of the distribution process. These people – mostly Communists and other far-left figures - managed to use their power of decision-making power to distribute land in exchange of political support or meagre gains from fattened hogs and other agricultural goods, which also expressed their power over the new landholders. The articles paint a picture of forced collectivization after the programme speech of Mátyás Rákosi, leader of the Communist (then Labourers’) party in Kecskemét on 20 August 1948.

The story that emerges from the papers reveals the goal of totalitarian political control embedded in the creation of ‘collectivized’ villages, while the private landholders

under pressure managed to be still more profitable and productive than the new state-run collective farms. Even through programmes such as the forced cotton production programme in the early 1950s, described in the article of Dorottya Balogh. Collectivization served no real economic purpose, but was rather a seizure of power in the countryside, with the complete destruction of the economic and societal system based on the land property system. The example of the Jászság and the countryside around Kecskemét is particularly important: here, even before the ‘European Civil War’ of 1914–1945, the basic land reform processes had already borne fruit. There was no real need for new land distribution or the ‘rationalization of production’ through the new collective farms, but the totalitarian experiment of the early 1950s thwarted these new experiments. It is interesting to observe the collective reactions to these processes: a large part of the population was still in a survival mindset necessary during the closing years of the European Civil War, commonly called World War II. This mindset gave them strength not to accept the fixed reality of communist collectivization, but to wait for something like the restoration after the fall of the Soviet Republic of 1919. Gábor Csikós describes how the farmers of the Jászság – in the central part of the Great Plains – looked forward to the next world war, which would hopefully bring liberation from the Communist oppressors.

Of course, the papers focusing on individual localities are not without their own particular approach to the topic. István Galambos describes the doubts and fears of the farmers of the Nyírség around the decline of the first wave of collectivization around 1953, after the inauguration of Prime Minister Imre Nagy. It is interesting to note here the relative resilience of the farmers’ mindset: the end of the tight collectivization struck them as the natural order of things, as something plausible. It creates a conflict with the communist state structure which seeks to maintain political power through collective farms, whatever the Prime Minister says about easing the collectivization. This brings to the fore one of the fundamental questions of the whole book, often unasked: who is the real political actor of collectivization? The central party is the obvious answer, but a number of vested interests and bureaucratic dynamics are also at play. The role of the Hungarian intelligentsia and industrial workers is discussed, and Csaba Káli emphasizes their ideological conviction towards state-socialist modernization. While these authors mainly presented the communist aggression against farmers as primarily originating from the state, this issue can be further analysed in the future. This can be done without shifting the blame away from the Soviet colonial regime that prevailed Hungary. It could simply be the analysis of how the state organs and those in power expressed their goals through violence in various situations. Hungarian historians need not shy away from these questions.

The response of the countryside to the 1956 revolution and the following wave of collectivization was similar to its reaction to these problems. Géza Cseh describes the beneficiaries of land distribution and collectivization who organized themselves as counterrevolutionary forces against the national revolution of 1956, and formed armed, mounted detachments to defend the the communist regime during the revolution. This

fact, the existence of serious, active popular support for the regime in some social strata could be a key question in the relationship between the socialist regime and Hungarian society.

The authors of the papers summarize the outcome of collectivization as the destruction of the Hungarian countryside, in economic, cultural and social sense. One of the most important summaries is provided by Krisztián Gergely Horváth, who raises the problem of the content of sociographies during the Kádár era after the successful completion of the collectivization campaign in the early 1960s. The social ills of ‘high socialism’ in the late 1960s and 1970s are strongly linked to the process of collectivization in the narratives of the social scientists of the period. Of course, they are presented as the necessary ‘surgical wounds’ of modernization and the downfall of an ‘obsolete societal stratum, yet they are presented as the cause of the psychological and physical decline of the people of the countryside. This kind of summary of the outcome sets the stage for the prospective work of historians in the future: the advent of privatization and the integration of the European agricultural market can be written, building on the description of the fall of the Hungarian agrarian sector outlined in the pages of this collection of articles.

The story of the collectivization in the book is clear and thorough, supported by many independent sources and facts about violence, coercion and political motives, the motivating factors are fairly well described, although some extended analysis of the Soviet system of social control is lacking. This book is a real and definitive testimony to the destruction of the peasant society in the Hungarian countryside during the second half of the bloody 20th century. ■

