

Collectivization and socialist agriculture (1917–1992): Revised comparison of the Soviet and East-European experience. Part I. Soviet collectivization under Stalin (1925–1953)

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Abstract. Literature on collectivization in Eastern Europe presents an outdated picture of Soviet collectivization close to Stalin's interpretation, and literature on Soviet collectivization ignores alternative policies to promote forced industrialization in countries with predominantly small-scale peasant farms. Before discussing collectivization and socialist agricultural policy in Eastern Europe, the author examines collectivization in the Soviet Union under Stalin, combining this analysis with some methodological reflections on the approach and central terms applied. Then the author focuses on the entangled comparison of collectivization and socialist agricultural policy after the World War II in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to thoroughly reassess this policy by answering the following key questions for the assessment of socialist agricultural policy: whether enforced collectivization was necessary or harmful for industrialization; whether Stalin's collectivization aimed at modernization of the agrarian sector at all; why socialist agricultural policy, after liquidation of private farms during collectivization under Stalin and Khrushchev, since the late 1970s in almost all socialist countries returned to supporting private small agricultural production. In addition to focusing on the decisive turning points of the agricultural policy, the author keeps the whole period in view, distinguishing the following phases with basically different political approaches: (1) collectivization under Stalin as based on class war and peasant subjugation to transfer capital from agriculture to industry; (2) collectivization under Khrushchev striving to complete it, although this policy was basically put in question (in 1953 in the Soviet Union and in 1957 in the GDR and Hungary); (3) efforts to stabilize the economically weak collective farms in the 1960s after finishing collectivization and replacing Khrushchev; (4) the final turn to modernization of agriculture expecting economies of scale through different concepts of industrialization in the 1970s; (5) the failure of these concepts causing a cost trap and enforcing the rehabilitation of small-scale private agriculture in the 1980s. The first part of the article shows how Stalin in 1929 turned collectivization away from modernization goals, which made collectivization an end in itself, enforcing the diversion of resources from agriculture to industrialization. Stalin did not trust the peasants and ignored their great capacities of increasing production, which made members of collective farms forced laborers with limited civil rights. Mechanization ensured primarily state control over agriculture and prevented an increase in yields.

Key words: collectivization of agriculture, Stalin, Khrushchev, socialist agriculture, mechanization, kolkhoz system, industrialization of agriculture, modernization, Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, small peasant farms, Chayanov, economies of scale, private plots, social differentiation, exploitation, myth of infallibility, Litsom k derevne

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Looking through recent publications on collectivization in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, I was shocked by their deficiencies: works on collectivization in Eastern Europe often lacked information on the Soviet Union, being based on outdated literature or just Stalin's interpretation; often they present collectivization in Eastern Europe as a process from 1948–1949 to the turn of the 1960s, ignoring the significant policy ruptures after Stalin's death. Literature on Soviet collectivization ignores alternative policies. Thus, a comparison of collectivization and socialist agricultural policy in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe may provide new insights. In Eastern Europe, small farmers coped with forced deliveries and provided capital for industrialization, which denies Stalin's statement that small peasant economy was not capable of reproduction and suggests that forced industrialization would have worked in the Soviet Union on the basis of small peasant economy as Chayanov suggested in the 1920s (Merl, 2022). This would have saved the Soviet Union from huge losses of social capital and agricultural productive forces determined by Stalin's policy. The suggested comparison also shows how long it took after the replacement of Khrushchev to finally stabilize collective farms as they needed significant state investment.

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Stalin's collectivization: a step to agricultural modernization or an end in itself?

Under Stalin, the goal of collectivization changed from a means to modernize agriculture within socialist economy to a means of subjugating peasants and getting capital for industrialization, thus, serving as a social engineering way to change the rural society in the desired direction (Irodachi, Bauerkämper, 2024: 6). Paying special attention to the economic aspects, I will show that Stalin's collectivization hindered modernization of agriculture and the Soviet Union's economic development.

In the *Collectivization in Eastern Europe*, edited by Irodachi and Bauerkämper, Viola did not provide an objective description of Stalin's collectivization with all its errors and changes, necessary for a fruitful comparison. Instead, she preferred lofty statements and broader theoretical categorizations, for instance, referring to Scott's "high modernism" and Bauman's "gardening state" (Viola, 2014: 63). This sounds academic but lacks practical usefulness for comparison. She argues that collectivization primarily aimed at changing the nature of peasants (whatever this should mean) and blames Lewin's (1974) "taking grain" for being too narrow. She mentions the "colony" status of the countryside as assuring and rationalizing its plunder" (Viola, 2014, 50–54, 68): "Collectivization was nothing if not a massive

exercise in social engineering aimed at developing, overnight, a new society and economic policy. Undesirable elements — the ‘weeds’, to use the Bauman metaphor — were mercilessly removed. An attempt to create ‘a new man’ — the *kolkhoznik* — followed, through education, new labor patterns, and military indoctrination” (Viola, 2014: 64)¹. While working on the topic for more than fifty years, I have never found a hint that Stalin considered members of the collective farm as “new” men. He trusted them no more than any other peasant. Viola’s focus on “resistance” also does not help to understand peasant exploitation. Instead of “resistance”, we should speak of the struggle for simple existence of members of collective farms under Stalin. Instead of critical analysis, Viola (2014: 55–56) presents the secret police reports on the “tough resistance of kulaks” as if they were true². Some of her statements are misleading, like that collectivization was an “integral component of Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan” (Viola, 2014: 49), although even its final version in May 1929 did not define collectivization as a precondition for industrialization, suggesting its start only in 1933, when the Soviet industry would be able to produce tractors (Pyatiletny plan, 1930: 338; Merl, 1985a: 184–211)³.

Recent studies of Soviet collectivization, in particular Stalin’s actions and interventions, have ignored how strongly Stalin influenced collectivization, often presenting his interpretations as correct (see, e.g.: Kondrashin, 2024). I will consider Stalin’s intervention in collectivization policy from 1924 to 1953, when he changed his approach radically several times. Such underestimation of Stalin’s role and his continuous interventions in collectivization leads to misinterpretations. Today we can better understand what was behind Stalin’s actions, especially Davies contributed to this understanding by referring to the archival materials to explain Stalin’s economic decisions⁴, for instance, his reaction to the bad harvest of 1936, different from 1932/1933, although the grain shortage was even more severe (Davies, 2014). We learn about Stalin’s decision making (cautious or pressing) and understanding of situations. Whenever

1. Collectivization was inspired by “rational planning” for the sake of “human betterment” (according to Bauman).
2. Based on the archival material, she mentions “kulak heavy attacks on the regime and its officials”, “widespread resistance” and “peasant sabotages”, concluding that the destruction of traditional elites, i.e., “liquidation of the kulak as a class”, was “a composite — and indeed requisite — measure” (Viola, 2014: 55).
3. The final plan suggested 13% collectivization for 1933, and Danilov rightly argued that this plan in May 1929 still presented the alternative — quick industrialization without forced collectivization.
4. Especially the final four volumes of his industrialization series based on the archival material provide important insights in Stalin’s actions: Davies, 1996; Davies, Wheatcroft, 2004; Davies, 2014; Davies, Harrison, Khlevnyuk, Wheatcroft, 2018.

his dictatorial rule was put in question, Stalin reacted wisely and effectively (Merl, 2012b).

Sometimes Stalin's actions suggested that he had doubts and was not sure what to do. As he usually moved forward by exerting extreme pressure on officials to exceed the set goals, we should consider situations in which he acted differently — interrupted campaigns, suddenly acted with more caution or even set moderate goals. This happened in March 1930 to collectivization, in 1931 in response to the crisis of industrialization (Merl, 2012b)⁵, in late 1932 during the famine, and with ending the “Great Terror” in 1938 (Merl, 2012b)⁶. In such cases Stalin temporarily set more moderate goals, as for the second Five-Year Plan, or looked for a compromise as in the end of 1932 with members of collective farms under famine. When the threat was overcome, Stalin often returned to the previous pace and extreme pressure on officials.

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Literature on East European agriculture after WWII

A comparison requires valid data on all East European countries, while my archival studies involved mainly Russian and partly GDR and Hungarian materials. In addition, I have considered basic research on collectivization and socialist agricultural policy in Eastern Europe. From 1988 to 1991 I worked as a follower of Karl-Eugen Wädekin at the Justus-Liebig University in Gießen and taught International Agricultural Policy, thus observing the agricultural transformation in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (Merl, 2023b).

Wädekin (1974; 1978) conducted comprehensive research in his two volumes on the Socialist agricultural policy: first, a comparative study of collectivization in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe up to 1960; second, a comparative study of socialist agriculture in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe up to 1976. Both volumes offer additional insights and a framework for comparing Socialist and Western agricultural policies. My contribution updates this research by today's knowledge of Stalin's and Khrushchev's intentions and the data covering the period from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, including the assessment of Socialist agricultural policy through its transformation to the market economy in the 1990s.

I would like to mention three new studies important for reassessing collectivization and socialist agricultural policy. Swain (1985) conducted a pioneer study of collectivization in Hungary, focusing

5. A standard example of Stalin's political turns is his speech to industrial managers in June 1931. He did not confess that he had pushed industrialization too hard but reduced the 1932 goals significantly.

6. In 1938, Stalin blamed Ezhov for the great terror and ordered him to be shot, although we know from the archives that Stalin gave all orders.

on its outcomes in the sociological perspectives⁷. Irodachi's and Bauerkämper's book (2014) provides several valuable national studies: although most are limited to collectivization until the early 1960s, some show stabilization of collective farms after collectivization and final outcomes of socialist agricultural policy⁸. Varga (2021) published a study important for understanding the failure of socialist agricultural policy on the example of Hungarian transformation from 1948 to 1990.

I am mostly interested in the economic aspects of collectivization and socialist agriculture, including agricultural modernization. Lenin expected that small farmers, under the threat of economic "collapse", as the Marxist theory suggested, would voluntarily join collective farms, and provided tractors (mechanical power), would convince peasants. For Lenin, modernization was the central aspect and not exploitation of peasants to finance industrialization as under Stalin. Lenin, however, paid no special attention to severe rural underemployment. I refer to the collectivization experience of Eastern Europe for a better understanding of possible Soviet alternatives, while the standard approach, on the contrary, compares collectivization in Eastern Europe with the "Soviet model" which did not exist. Very few studies have considered in detail the whole path of Socialist agricultural policy (collectivization and socialist agriculture) from 1924 to 1992, but only such a comprehensive approach allows for a reassessment⁹. I will start with some methodological remarks about sources and myths of the achievements of collectivization, which are still widespread not only in the Russian literature.

Methodological remarks on the use of sources

Archival material and other sources of the Stalin period present the "official" point of view, not the "truth". Already Fainsod (1958) showed in his study of Smolensk that there was the same interpretation in the published and archival materials; therefore, every "fact" or interpretation needs critical verification. However, in recent publications, not only young and inexperienced historians use archival material uncritically and present their findings as the "truth" (see, e.g.: Viola, 2014; Kondrashin, 2024). What the secret policy reports present as sabotage, terror acts or resistance often were only

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7. He also conducted comparative studies of collectivization in Eastern Europe (Swain, 2014) and of what happened after the end of socialist regimes in four countries (Swain, 1999).
 8. The editors blamed previous research for not having paid enough attention to what collectivization meant for peasants (pp. 4, 33), but contributions partly answered the same questions (pp. 4–6).
 9. See, e.g.: Merl, 2019 and Merl, 2020b on the whole relevant period in Russia and the Soviet Union, Varga, 2021 — on Hungary from 1945 to 1990.

reactions to attacks of the regime¹⁰. Thus, most horses and cows died at collective farms due to the lack of fodder or epidemics, not due to the “peasant resistance”. In any case, it is necessary to check whether other reasons were possible and plausible, but a desperate fight for survival should not be called resistance.

Officials falsified reports in reaction to the pressure “from above”: fearing the loss of their jobs, they reported what Stalin or Khrushchev wanted to hear, pointed at alleged culprits to be made responsible in public for mistakes. With such pressure on officials first Stalin and then Khrushchev lost the opportunity to get honest reports, describing the situation as drastic and miserable as it really was. Many recent works ignore comprehensive studies of Soviet collectivization conducted in the 1970s — 1980s (see, e.g.: Danilov, 1957, 1977, 1979; Fitzpatrick, 1994; Hunter, 1988; Jasny, 1949; Karcz, 1979; Kollektivizatsiya, 1989; Lewin, 1968; Millar, 1974; Millar, Nove, 1976; Tragediya sovetskoi derevni, 1999–2006).

Stalin never admitted his mistakes (or miscalculations) even to his closest companions. By blaming others for his mistakes and miscalculations, Stalin could change his policy, while denying such changes in public. This was his strategy to construct the myth of his infallibility already in the early 1930s¹¹. To maintain his dictatorial rule, Stalin’s actions had to be unpredictable and incalculable for others (Gregory, 2004; Merl, 2017a, 2021b). In public, he always presented others as scapegoats and often ordered those who had warned him before to be killed or executed, which is what happened in 1932 to the vice minister of state farms, Mikhail Volf, who had explained already in mid-1928 why collectivization would cause a famine (Merl, 2023a).

Khrushchev’s approach was somewhat different. Stalin maintained the myth of his infallibility by being extremely careful with public statements, which allowed him to correct his policy in case of failure or danger without being blamed for mistakes. On the contrary, Khrushchev often made foolish promises in public, which is why he was blamed for failures, for example, when he failed to keep his promise to surpass the US in the per head consumption of milk and meat by 1961 (Merl, 2002).

What myths are based on the achievements of collectivization?

“Class differentiation” of the Russian peasantry was a myth, although there was social differentiation (Chayanov, 1927; Shanin, 1972; Merl, 1981). Class differentiation did not develop in any East European

10. During my research in the mid-1970s, I checked the archival data on “terror acts” by “kulaks”, and most were just helpless revenge for the acts of state terror.

11. See my comment on Stalin’s “dizziness with success” in Merl, 2024c.

country; however, in some countries, there was a huge difference between noble estate owners and landless workers. There were no convincing criteria of the “exploiting” farmer (Merl, 1981; Swain, 2014), since seasonal hiring during the peak harvest was a widespread practice. Only in some countries with the developed peasantry, as in Germany, farmers hired workers on a permanent basis, as a rule, one farmhand and one maid.

However, there were two other forms of “exploitation” during collectivization: exploitation of peasants by the state and “self-exploitation” of the small peasant economy. State exploitation was the key feature of collectivization under Stalin: the state set the producer prices to control the income of collective farms and required to dispose their production without taking care of re-production. “Self-exploitation” was a widespread practice of the small peasant economy: peasants used “family labor” in their production, having no fixed value compared to working time and wages in the socialist industry (Swain, 1985).

Considering “modernization by mechanization” under Stalin, one should admit that modernization would have required more than tractors and since the mid-1930s also combines. The crucial questions were as follows: whether the traction power in the 1930s overcame or maintained the level achieved in 1929, i.e., whether the mechanical traction power allowed for more than partial replacement of the animal traction power destroyed by “taking grain”; whether the available agricultural knowledge and technology (such as crop rotation) was used to significantly increase crop yields and livestock production. During collectivization under Stalin the answer to both questions was “no”. In the 1930s, the mechanical traction power did not fully replace the animal traction power of 1929. Mechanization was intended only to control agricultural production and even sabotaged the introduction of improved crop rotations (Merl, 2016a, 2016c). Imports of tractors and heavy agricultural machinery ceased in 1932 after the launch of the Stalingrad tractor plant, but tractors could be used only for a limited number of field works due to a great shortage of towed implements. Already in 1937, due to Stalin’s reorientation to military defense, the further supply of tractors and fuel was reduced, an increasing number of MTS-tractors were out of order due to the lack of spare parts and bad repair. In the 1930s, all attempts to increase agricultural production by seed rotation and simple measures (agro-minimum) were blocked by Stalin’s insistence on large areas of grain crops (Merl, 2016a, 2016c).

Collectivization under Stalin: Decisive turning points (1925–1953)

Stalin’s interest in collectivization was determined by his decision to accelerate industrialization in 1926. Further, I will consider in detail

Stalin's concept of collectivization, paying special attention to drastic changes in his approach, which started from "taking grain" and led to the subjugation of peasants as forced unpaid laborers to provide capital for industrialization.

Policy before the start of total collectivization at the end of 1929

Contrary to Stalin's dogmatic version, the 1917 land reform was not ordered from above: already under the Provisional Government, peasants started to occupy estate lands within their "revolution" against the noble landowners. The Bolsheviks initially intended to transform estates into large state farms, but Lenin decided to win the peasants' support for the revolution by the law proposed by the left wing of the Social Revolutionaries based on peasant electoral mandates, thus, being tolerant of peasants' initiatives to confiscate landlords' lands (Merl, 2017b, 2024a).

After the bad harvest of 1924, responding to the negative attitude of the rural population towards the new regime, the Bolsheviks developed an agricultural program *Litsom k derevne* ("turning to the village") to overcome the basic problem of rural underemployment. This program was to provide incentives to create new jobs in the countryside, to improve agricultural technologies to raise yields and animal productivity, to organize peasant farms in cooperatives and, finally, to ensure resources for national industrialization. The state was to support cooperatives with credits, inputs, processing and marketing means (Merl, 2022; Wehner, 1998).

All proposed measures were justified; however, the intention to start with the accumulation of capital in agriculture to finance the industry would not have led to rapid industrialization. *Litsom k derevne* was not a program of industrialization, but a feasible program to develop peasant agriculture, which had no alternative. The speed of agricultural development would depend on the state's willingness to provide funding and accept social differentiation in the countryside. As long as peasant farms retained the ability to produce, they would increase production and improve farming. Even in unfavorable market conditions, they had no choice but to take the burden and provide capital for industrialization. This is evident from the collectivization experience in the East European countries from 1948 to 1962 (see Part II). The capital transfer was organized by the price policy in connection with obligatory deliveries. As long as the state did not use violence, the risk of destroying peasant means of production was minimal, and peasants would retain agricultural production due to the lack of other sources of income (Merl, 1981, 2022).

In the mid-1920s, the first Five-Year-Plan for agriculture was developed. The group around Chayanov (Kondratiev, Makarov and Chelintsev) prepared projects for industrialization of agriculture,

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starting with vertical cooperation, while collectivization was expected on the agenda only after the start of the national production of tractors and the introduction of mechanized agricultural technologies from 1933 (Merl, 1981, 2022)

Litsom k derevne was based on the revision of the concept of “class differentiation”. The *kulturniki* were considered “working peasants” due to not exploiting others (as pre-capitalist kulaks). Even if they temporarily hired a worker in addition to their family labor, they were not considered kulaks. Chayanov (1927) spoke of a new generation of farmers hardened in the World and Civil War and loyal to the Soviet power. *Litsom k derevne* intended to support the *kulturniki* as peasants willing to improve their farming methods and to make use of scientific knowledge to expand and intensify their production¹².

When grain procurement at the beginning of the 1925/26 campaign went slower than expected, Stalin blamed peasants for “sabotaging” grain procurement and, thus, industrialization, and made the Party revive the concept of “class war” for the countryside. However, his accusations were groundless: by the end of the procurement campaign in the spring of 1926, the set amount of grain was collected. As the state set low grain prices, the capital outflow from agriculture to industry in 1926/27 was significant. As peasants had no alternative than selling grain to the state, they were forced to accept low prices (Merl, 1981: 123–140; 2016b, 2020a).

Stalin’s return to the concept of “class war” was an attack on the *kulturniki* supported by other members of the Party leadership. Disenfranchisement in the election to the soviets in 1927 was expanded, and special “individual taxation” “for the richest 3% percent of peasants” was introduced (Merl, 2022; Merl, 2016b, 2020a). Although the available data shows that the “exploitation” of poor peasants by kulaks hardly existed in the Soviet countryside, and that there was no capitalist stratification, Stalin did not give up his attacks on the well-to-do peasants. Other Party leaders tried to defend them, saying that an increase in agricultural production significantly depended on their work, and suggested exempting the *kulturniki* from individual taxation and giving them back the right to vote for the local soviets (Merl, 2022).

Although the decision to speed up industrialization without accumulating capital in agriculture was right, a combination of forced industrialization with the support of peasant farms would have been feasible. Unfavorable producer prices set by the state for agricultural

12. In his recommendations to Molotov in 1927, Chayanov stressed basic points ignored under Stalin: the need to provide the state financial support to start agricultural modernization, the need to invest in agricultural research and in training agricultural producers to improve farming, and the need to grant farmers autonomy of decisions on the best use of human capital and means of production.

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goods would have been possible only without an attack on the well-to-do peasants, since they would have increased production and improved their farming to reduce their burden. Stalin's attack on the well-to-do farmers also hit rural households that did not hold enough implements and animal traction power to cultivate their fields and depended on rented means of production (Merl, 2022).

Fearing to be called “kulaks” and “class enemies”, the well-to-do peasants and the *kulturniki* responded to Stalin's attack by stopping what was classified as exploitation — rental of farm implements and horse traction power, which widely practiced before in the grain producing regions. However, hired labor hardly existed: only 0.5% of peasant farms hired workers in the Soviet countryside (Merl, 1981, 424–437).

A feasible alternative to ensure the grain procurement for export to finance industrialization would also have been the return to a tax in kind introduced by Lenin in 1921. However, in the mid-1920s, nobody considered this solution. The tax in kind had provided the state with more than necessary amount of grain. In 1924, the tax in kind was substituted by a tax in cash, since the costs of procuring and storing the grain seemed too high. Only at the end of 1932 Stalin decided to return to a tax in kind by introducing the obligatory deliveries but denied that he copied Lenin.

In 1928, at the July Plenum of the Central Committee, Stalin claimed that peasants had to pay a tribute for industrialization, referring to Preobrazhensky's concept (after his exclusion from the Party) of “primary socialist accumulation”. In 1929, Stalin transferred this claim to collectivization, ordering to organize collective farms on the basis of peasant farms' implements (Merl, 2016b, 2020a). In his approach to the peasantry, Stalin did not know any other way than violence, although he never spoke of it in public. He preferred to put pressure on his officials, leaving them no alternative than to use force against peasants (otherwise officials would risk being repressed).

At the beginning of 1928, Stalin intervened in the slowly progressing grain procurement campaign. Just before, for the 10th anniversary of the Revolution, in November 1917, the Party gave poor peasants the privilege to pay less taxes, which reduced the pressure for them to market grain and reduced the state grain procurement. When visiting the Urals and Siberia, Stalin put local officials under severe pressure. He reestablished the procurement dictatorship of the War Communism by ordering in January 1928 the forced grain procurement and expropriation of stored grain (even from millers). Local markets were closed. This had fatal consequences for the national grain supply, and in the spring of 1928, it even became necessary to import grain (Merl, 2016b, 2020a, 1981).

In the article “At the grain front” in the summer of 1928, Stalin claimed that the grain marketing was cut half compared to the prewar level and blamed small peasant farms for not delivering enough grain

to market. However, his data covered only the grain export and the grain consumption in urban areas, ignoring the fact that peasants in the “grain consumption zone” in the central and north regions also consumed marketed grain, often transported over hundreds of kilometers. With this consumption, grain marketing was only 20% below the prewar level due to the still lower gross grain harvest and the growth of the (mainly) rural population (Merl, 1981, 2016b, 2020a)¹³.

While the state kept forcing grain procurement, in the beginning of 1928, the first collectivization campaign started. The state promised peasants willing to organize a collective farm a tractor for each new farm, which was attractive for rural households with land but without necessary implements, especially because Stalin’s return to the class war had made it difficult to find a peasant willing to rent implements and animal traction power. Although in the spring of 1928 only about 1% of peasants organized collective farms, the state was not able to keep the promise: only 1% of the new collective farms got tractors. The number of available tractors was very limited, since most had to be imported, and the imports were sharply reduced in 1926.

In the letter published in the *Pravda* in June 1928, peasants from Samara described their idea of large economy — “peasant-state farms” instead of collective farms: the state would control production and pay modest monthly salaries to farmers. Thus, peasants identified the core problem of collectivization — peasant survival under severe rural underemployment. From the government, Mikhail Volf, responsible for the First-Year Plan in agriculture (later he was appointed as Vice Minister of state farms), answered peasants in the *Pravda*: he hinted that mechanization would further reduce the labor input in agricultural production, thus making the problem of rural underemployment worse. He stated that it would be necessary to develop new, more labor-intensive production branches in agriculture to cope with the surplus of workforce in the countryside and to avoid famine in the future (Merl, 1993: 487–494).

In the summer of 1928, the Party leadership evaluated the results of the collectivization campaign and concluded that nobody needed such dwarf collective farms with several members, no farm implements and widely scattered land plots. The Party leaders decided that scarce tractors would be provided only to collective farms with large

13. Although the manipulation is evident, based on this data, Kondrashin (2024: 483–484) argued that in the mid-1920s, collective farms marketed 47.2% of their grain and that Stalin’s decision about collectivization was justified. But the source provides data for collective and state farms together: state farms had a high share of grain marketing, since they did not use grain for fodder and workers, while collective farms marketed at best about the same share of grain as middle peasants and hardly used any grain for fodder (Merl, 1981: 445–463).

land plots, which should be established from above by organizations capable of operating tractors and tractor colons.

From now on, collective farms (with tractors) were organized from above, and voluntary entry into the collective farm was increasingly replaced by forced entry. To get large fields necessary for tractor colons, almost all members of the village commune had to join. To force them to do it, those refusing to join were given plots far from the village. In addition to the pressure from above, Stalin's decisions started a bureaucratic competition between organizations capable of agricultural production with tractors: *Khlebotsentr*, *Kolkhozsentr* and *Traktortsentr*. They all wanted to get scarce tractors, but only projects promising the largest number of peasants and hectares had a chance.

In 1929, the competition for tractors increased when the regional party organizations were to present their five-year plans. Under the general pressure to overfulfill the plans set from above, all developed extremely ambitious plans far from reality and promised to complete total collectivization in a shorter time to get all tractors (only about two out of thousands of regions had a chance to get tractors). They declared themselves "areas of total collectivization" (Merl, 1985b: 370–380)¹⁴.

Thus, the (reasonable) Party decision in the summer of 1928 when combined with the pressure from above had negative consequences. Just the lack of tractors determined the promised rate of collectivization under the competition between bureaucratic organizations. Trying to fulfill their plans, they put even more pressure on peasants. As the pressure increased and farmers were forced to join collective farms against their will, it became quite typical that after signing the contract men left to find work in the industry, since in the field "steel horses" took their jobs away¹⁵.

To stop this crazy competition and to bring the number of organized large farms in line with available tractors, intervention from above was necessary. But Stalin continued to increase the pace of collectivization. Neither he nor Molotov wanted to stop this "revolutionary process". From the ambitious "success" reports Stalin got the impression that peasants would show little resistance to forced collectivization, which obviously determined his decision to start mass collectivization on the basis of peasant implements. This

14. However, *Kolkhozsentr* and some other organizations suggested a higher pace than the First-Year Plan, explaining the need to establish large collective farms by providing the state with marketed grain. They expected that the state would take on a significant share of the costs. When the state reduced its share to 0.73 billion rubles, they simply increased the share to be provided by peasants from initial 30% to 48%.

15. Some of the projects initially received a lot of publicity, for example the Sevchenko state farm in Ukraine, organizing farmers with tractor colons (Merl, 1985b, 2016b, 2020a).

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meant that middle peasants with farm implements would be forced to join collective farms: instead of receiving tractors from the state, collective farms were to use peasants' means of production, which led to expropriation of middle peasants after their entry into the collective farm (Merl 2016b, 2020a).

In his speeches Stalin now talked about a “desire” of the middle peasants to join collective farms, which put hard pressure on the officials: they had to force unwilling middle peasants to join. This increased pressure and violence against peasants even further. At the same time, the already small funding of agriculture was cut (Merl, 2022; Wehner, 1998). Although this meant that the state would finance only industrialization, the state propaganda continued to present collectivization as mechanization of agricultural production with tractors. Agro-industrial complexes were established, and huge state farms were organized, although none of these projects got the necessary state funding (Merl, 1985b: 365–369).

To reserve all state funding for industrialization and to continue collectivization on the basis of peasant implements was Stalin's decision. This means, contrary to Viola's claims (2014: 58), that “taking grain” to finance industrialization was the main motive for his decision to carry out collectivization. Stalin expected that “taking grain” from collective farms would be easier than from many individual peasants, and huge grain exports would provide funding for industrialization (Merl, 1985b: 370–400). And Stalin continued to emphasize that his plans were not obligatory but should be exceeded as much as possible.

Total collectivization and the uprising of peasant women (1929–1930)

In 1929, at the November Plenum, Stalin ordered to start total collectivization with the participation of worker brigades sent to the countryside for taking grain. He also sent 25,000 skilled industrial workers and Party members to the countryside for a two-week training, after which they would take over the management of collective farms (Merl, 1990b: 73–90; Viola, 1987). Obviously, Stalin believed that to manage a large agricultural farm no special knowledge was necessary. He did not mention that private plots should be kept in collective farms.

In this campaign, there was no place for voluntariness. The Party conducted a seemingly democratic voting among those present to distribute responsibility. This method had been used for the first time at the beginning of 1928 to make peasants within village communes vote for “self-taxation” ordered by the state. All members of the village had to attend the meeting convened and held by the state officials (instead of the village headman). Outsiders, secret policemen and members of worker brigades took part to prevent villagers from

expressing their opinion openly. To ensure liability, every member of the village commune had to attend the meeting about organization of the collective farm. At the beginning, it was possible to express different opinions, but at the voting at the end, everybody had to agree, being “convinced” by the officials’ arguments. Those present knew that any dissenting vote would have consequences such as punishment on the spot (arrest). Sometimes, the chairman without discussion put the following question to a vote “Who is against Soviet power?”. When nobody dared to say “I am”, he would sum up: the decision to establish a collective farm was unanimously made. By this manipulation, even those who were against became part of the binding decision, as they were present and did not protest openly (Merl, 2012: 28–29, 64–72).

The officials had no real chance to convince peasants of the advantages of collective farming, since it was obvious to everybody that there were none. Peasants knew how poorly such farms worked. If they failed to “convince” peasants, Stalin blamed the officials for not being able to do their job and replaced them. With such pressure, Stalin reached both goals: the officials reported “successes” and pushed collectivization ahead by putting increasingly more pressure on peasants, scaring them with the enemy pictures of “sabotage” and threatening to declare them counterrevolutionaries or kulaks.

In December 1939, in his speech at the Conference of Marxist agricultural scientists, Stalin announced crucial decisions about the final nature of Soviet collective farms, when the campaign of total collectivization was already underway. He changed the classification of collective farms: previously they were called “transitional type”, now — “socialist forms of production”. This had a repressive meaning: as “socialist forms”, collective farms lost the ability to disobey the state orders. From now on, failures to comply with the state orders meant that they were “pseudo-collective farms” and had to be liquidated, losing all their property.

At this conference, Stalin also made his final decision on kulaks: they were forbidden to be accepted into collective farms. Before (and later in some East European countries) some officials proposed to accept kulaks with strict restrictions. Some kulaks had been already accepted after giving all their property to the collective farm in the hope that this would give them a chance for survival. Now Stalin announced the “liquidation of kulaks as a class”, and the corresponding degree of the Central Committee followed on January 30, 1930 (Merl, 1990a: 61–103). Many peasants, whom the Party had praised as *kulturniki*, shared the fate of “kulaks”. The order to arrest kulaks and deport their families was the most effective measure to make peasants collective farmers by force. Due to the vague criteria, every peasant could be declared a “kulak” or a “podkulak”. The share of peasant farms registered as members of collective farms increased from 20% to 59% from January to March 10, 1930.

In his speech to Marxist agricultural scientists, Stalin argued that petty peasant farms were not able to ensure even simple reproduction in agriculture. To what extent Stalin lost ground in his attitude to the petty peasantry can be seen in the further history of collectivization in Eastern Europe, which convincingly proved that small peasant farms were able to ensure reproduction even in very unfavorable conditions of obligatory deliveries and class wars. In East Europe, most small farmers resisted this extreme pressure for more than a decade, showing even better economic results than collective farms subsidized by the state (see Part II). This suggests that the funding of industrialization based on small peasant farms would have also worked in the Soviet Union, despite Stalin's claim that large enterprises, even if they work with peasant implements in the "manufacture period of collective farms", would be superior.

On January 5, 1930, the Central Committee issued a decree to speed up collectivization more and reduce its time frame, having identified three regions, which proved to what extent collectivization was to provide grain for exports: collectivization in the main grain producing regions should be finished first — in the Lower and Middle Volga regions and in the North Caucasus already in the fall of 1930 or in the spring of 1931; in all other grain producing regions — from the fall of 1931 to the spring of 1932; in all other regions — until the end of the First Five Year Plan (in 1933) (Merl, 1985: 377). This decree did not mention the supply of tractors.

When Stalin ordered to start total collectivization at the November Party Conference, there was no final kolkhoz charter. Only in December 1929, Yakovlev's commission was given the task of developing the charter of the collective farm. In the recommendation for this commission, the Central Committee decree as of January 5, 1930, mentioned "artel" as a "transitional form", which meant that only commune would be the final form. All means of commodity production were to be socialized. The mention of artel as a transitional form under the extreme state pressure on the officials to "exceed" every plan was understood as a direct order to organize communes. Stalin personally contributed to this understanding, when he approved the preliminary version of the artel charter, published on February 6, 1930, with no mentions of a private plot or a private cow (Merl, 1985b: 396–399). Thus, it was no wonder that some officials started to expropriate even small livestock and poultry, i.e., Stalin did not expect serious resistance to collectivization.

During the collectivization campaign, widespread private farms were liquidated, and cows were expropriated. Uprisings of peasant women against "expropriation of the cow" started and in February 1930 turned into a mass movement. Women attacked regional centers of the state power with the traditional peasant weapon: sickles, pitchforks and scythes. In some rural districts, the Soviet

regime lost control (Merl, 1985b: 148–153)¹⁶. Such a harsh reaction of peasant women was determined by the fact that the loss of the cow threatened the survival of the family. Whole districts run out of the state control. Women led the resistance as they had less to fear: men risked being arrested or shot on the spot, but the regime did not dare to touch women or call mothers of most Red Army soldiers counterrevolutionaries, saboteurs or enemies of the people. In all cases, a man behind the uprising had to be found and repressed as “kulak” or “priest”. Therefore, to suppress this riot, the Red Army could not be sent, and the secret police could only be used to a limited extent.

Only then Stalin realized that the accelerated collectivization campaign with full liquidation of private farms caused a critical situation, threatening his rule. He was extremely concerned about rapidly quickly spreading uprisings of peasant women against “collectivization of the cow”. This chaos also jeopardized the start of the spring sowing campaign. Stalin understood that he had to act immediately.

Although he was responsible for the actions of the state officials by starting the total liquidation of private farms, Stalin blamed them and defused the situation by stressing the voluntary entry into the collective farm. But the most important was his concession to peasant women — he allowed to keep a private cow and a private plot after joining the artel. To address peasant women directly, on March 2, 1930, Stalin published in the *Pravda* an article about “dizziness with success” together with the revised final version of the artel charter, with the peasants retaining their private plot, cows and some livestock as collective farmers (Merl, 2016b, 2020a, 2024c).

With Stalin’s interventions, the Party and the state soon took back control. As Stalin fulfilled the main requirements of peasant women, the uprisings died down within a few days. Formally, some officials were arrested and convicted. But the consequences for collectivization were severe: the registered rate of collectivization fell from 59% in March to about 20% in June 1930. Several “collective farms” disappeared: to exit the collective farm in March–April 1930 was still easy, as in most cases there was no real organization yet. In 1930, the spring sowing campaign and the fall harvesting campaign were carried out mainly by individual peasants.

Stalin’s responsibility for the “abuses” is out of question — he put the officials under pressure to speed up total collectivization, and “dizziness with success” pushed him forward. By blaming the officials for all abuses, Stalin acted differently from Lenin in 1921: to create a myth of his infallibility, he did not confess in own mistakes or

16. There were some local uprisings of peasant women due to the lack of grain already in the spring of 1928. The uprisings became widespread in the fall of 1929 and turned into a mass movement at the beginning of 1930.

failures. His reaction in March 1930 became his pattern of coping with crises and threats in order to maintain his rule: he denied any personal responsibility and even changes made in the course. In March 1930, his intervention was combined with a temporary, rather tactical retreat and a permanent concession: his condemnation of the harm of “voluntary entry” was tactical. Already in the fall of 1930 he ordered to restart collectivization and liquidation of kulaks, allowing the same violence against the peasants but at the same time a private plot and a cow for collective farmers.

It would be wrong to consider private plots as primarily a concession: they were a precondition to stabilize the system of collective farms after the 1932/1933 famine, and Stalin preserved this combination of small and large economies until the end of his life. In 1933, he finally understood the importance of private plots as a way for collective farmers to survive by producing some food, while the state could get all produce of collective farms without paying for it. This was also the reason why Stalin insisted on making private plots an obligatory part of the collective-farm charter in Eastern Europe.

Stalin was deeply traumatized by the fact that he had not foreseen the conflict with peasant women about the cow. On April 3, 1930, in another article in the *Pravda*, Stalin blamed the Party for not paying enough attention to the work with peasant women. Even at the first Congress of the collective-farm shock workers on February 19, 1933, at the peak of the famine, he admitted the previous “slight misunderstanding” between the Soviet power and peasant women “about the cow”, and received applause for the statement “Today this problem is solved” (Merl, 2024c).

Final formation of the collective-farm system after the 1932/32 famine through the compromise that ensured survival

Stalin’s intervention on March 2, 1930, did not change his approach to collectivization: arbitrary grain procurement continued just as under War Communism, ignoring the collective farms’ needs for reproduction. Often after forced procurement, there was no grain to feed the family, horses and to sow. In the summer of 1930, it would have been possible to stop forced collectivization: the good harvest proved that private farms still were able to produce, although the market was destroyed. The critical loss of animal traction power happened later, at collective farms. When the liquidation of the most successful farmers started, the social costs were already high, and the destruction of livestock began. The state could procure grain by obligatory deliveries but only provided reproduction and incentives to increase production.

Already in the fall of 1930, Stalin ordered to restart collectivization with the same repressions against peasants. Even the “liquidation

of kulak farms” and deportation of their families (Viola, 2007) continued as they had proved to be the most effective means to drive peasants into collective farms (Merl, 1990a). Nobody wondered where new “kulaks” came from after their “liquidation as a class” at the beginning of 1930. In the following years, the authorities continued to uncover “kulaks” in order to intimidate peasants and prevent them from leaving collective farms (Merl, 1990a).

Due to rural overpopulation, seasonal work was the best what collective farms could offer their members. To survive, all needed food, regardless of their necessity for production: collective farms had a fixed number of workers, while state farms hired workers only during peak seasons. Already after the 1931 procurement campaign, there was the need to transport grain as “seed loan” back to collective farms, otherwise they would not have been able to cultivate their fields.

Stalin’s rapid policy changes concerning the “voluntary principle” disturbed peasants and contributed to the breakdown of their resistance. By this time all farms had already suffered from terror, and only in the national districts at the Soviet borders, especially in the Caucasus and Middle Asia, armed conflicts against collectivization continued. Most incidents, classified by the secret policy as “terror acts” were rather helpless reactions of the peasants who had suffered from expropriation. This does not mean that there was no peasant resistance against collectivization, but it had taken place mainly at the beginning of the state terror in 1929 — the beginning of 1930, while later it became a peasant fight just for survival.

To what extent the peasant “resistance” and other factors played a role can be seen in the enormous loss of livestock from 1928 and 1933. Only slaughtering the livestock can be considered resistance. Some livestock was slaughtered by farmers, but most cows and traction animals died for other reasons (especially lack of fodder) for which the state alone was to blame. The data on livestock during collectivization explains quite reliably the reasons why and how its numbers declined. Even the time of its decline reveals a lot: in 1929–1930, it was most likely slaughtered by peasants in response to the threat of expropriation, in 1931–1933, primarily due to the lack of fodder. Even food was scarce, and millions of people died of hunger.

While slaughtering farm livestock for meat, peasants tried to keep cows and traction animals (horses and oxen) as long as possible. Poultry was the first to disappear in the countryside, already during the first state attack on peasants in the beginning of 1928; pigs and cattle (other than cows) were slaughtered with the start of enforced collectivization in 1929–1930. Peasants did not want to give their livestock to collective farms: by January 1930, the number of pigs had been halved (to 52% of 1928); 35% of cattle (without cows) were slaughtered in 1929; in 1933, only 47% (compared to 1928) of livestock was left. But cows (milk was necessary for children and for the family

survival) and traction animals (necessary for cultivating fields) were kept as long as possible: the number of cows dropped only to 87% in January 1930; two thirds of cows were still alive in the beginning of 1933; the number of horses dropped by about 10% in 1929–1930. By 1933, the number of horses was halved, mainly due to the lack of fodder at collective farms from 1930 to 1932. Forced collectivization caused chaos, nobody had clear ideas about organization of work and responsibility for feeding livestock, when fodder and food were in extremely short supply, not enough for all to survive (Merl, 1985b: 220–229).

A real turning point in Stalin's agricultural policy occurred only when the catastrophe of the 1932/33 famine was already unavoidable. Stalin looked for such a compromise with peasants that would allow them to survive, while the state would retain the right to dispose the collective farm products. Stalin basically returned to the tax in kind in the form of obligatory supplies hidden under a rather symbolic payment far below the costs of production but combined with the guarantee to have a private plot.

In the spring of 1932, Stalin was not yet fully aware of the scale of the catastrophe. He was still confident in the possibility of procuring the required amount of grain and of fulfilling the high procurement plan by giving peasants more incentives and a guarantee of some payment for their work. By the decree of May 6, 1932, local markets were again legalized — as “kolkhoz markets”, but they were allowed to work from January 15, 1933, only after fulfilling the regional procuring plan (Merl, 2023a). In July 1932, the advance distribution in kind was announced — as bound to the number of workdays, thus, establishing the principle of payment based on the work done. During threshing, 10% to 15% of threshed grain was to be distributed based on the number of workdays earned to this time (Merl, 1990a: 327–391)¹⁷. Due to the terror under the famine, both decrees became effective only after the 1933 harvest — in 1933–1934.

Stalin's first measure after realizing the emergency of famine was the decree “for protecting socialist property” of August 7, 1932, which declared the production of collective farms “socialist property”. Stalin personally prepared this decree to save the poor harvest for the state. In addition, the Torgsin started to sell bread and flour for gold (Osokina, 2021; Merl, 2023a: 187)¹⁸. Although Stalin had realized how serious the situation was, he publicly claimed that only malicious saboteurs died of hunger, which was a fair punishment for them.

17. Before, distribution often followed demand (very high as many members were hardly needed for work). However, increasingly more members got nothing as the state took everything.

18. This decree underlines that Stalin understood how dangerous the situation was. In 1932–1933, Torgsin offered to pay in gold for grain also in the countryside.

In January 1933, the decree returned the tax in kind: collective and private farms were obliged to deliver grain by hectare norms since the 1933 harvest. Obligatory delivery norms were also introduced for private plots of the members of collective farms — half of those introduced for private farmers (Merl, 1990a: 129–158).

Although Stalin copied Lenin’s political turn of 1921, he never admitted it and the fact that forced industrialization with collectivization had caused a famine, since this would have put his rule at jeopardy. He denied the famine and spoke of sabotage. The peak of repression was reached when he ordered to introduce passports and to arrest peasants trying to flee from starving regions (Merl, 2023a: 190–193). Although talking about famine was taboo, later Stalin blamed managers of the Ministry of Agriculture “for counterrevolutionary activity” — “organization of the famine” — in Ukraine, Northern Caucasus and Belorussia. They were convicted and many were executed for destroying tractors and agricultural machinery, for not having sown the fields (Merl, 2023a: 192; Tragediya, 2001, vol. 3: 7–47). Only in September 1988, for the first time the *Pravda* admitted that there was a famine in 1932/33 (Danilov, 1988).

The three elements in force since 1933 — forced deliveries, the guaranteed private plot and the advanced payment in kind during threshing — “established the kolkhoz system”. They were part of Stalin’s compromise under the famine of 1932/33, which put an end to his previously arbitrary policy. This compromise stabilized the collective-farm system at least temporarily. In 1935, Stalin ordered an attempt to consolidate lands of collective farms by the state land certificates “for eternity”.

Private plots allowed collective farmers to produce some basic food. After discussing the size of private plots with Stalin at the second conference of collective-farm shock workers in January 1935, this size was set to 0.5 hectares (with regional differences from 0.25 to 1 hectares), and the right to a plot was confirmed in the collective-farm charter of 1935. Many plots were slightly enlarged. There was no allowance for grain cultivation, but some used the plot to grow corn. At the newly opened kolkhoz markets, collective farmers were allowed to sell self-grown products for cash. As they got hardly any money for work from their collective farm, they sold products to pay taxes to the state and to buy other goods (Merl, 1990a: 281–294)¹⁹. Collective farmers were to provide the state with a certain amount of potatoes, meat (regardless of keeping livestock) and milk (if keeping a cow). All additional products could be kept or marketed for attractive prices, which was an incentive to increase production on private

19. Only cotton growing collective farms in Middle Asia paid money to their members since 1935, after the state significantly raised the procurement price for cotton. However, at the same time collective farmers had to buy food at high prices at the market (Merl, 1990a: 371–390).

plots. From 1933 to 1935, the state provided support for buying young animals for fattening to restore livestock numbers which had sharply decreased during collectivization. Food production on private plots became essential for supplying Soviet people with meat, potatoes and fruits under extreme deficit in the state trade and for providing collective farmers with more than half of their money income (Merl, 1990a: 404–417).

In the late 1920s, Stalin ignored the potential of small private production, now he recognized it and confirmed the right to the private plot after the famine, which combined forced labor at collective farms with self-exploitation on private plots. Stalin finally understood that agriculture could not be controlled only by violence and terror — collective farmers needed a perspective for survival. Although this combination of large and small economies was a precondition for the very operation of collective farms, Stalin just tolerated private small production without ceasing to suspect it ideologically. Khrushchev seems to have never understood why Stalin decided to tolerate private plots, which is why his ideological fight against them in the late 1950s determined the final failure of his agricultural policy.

“Advanced payment” during threshing provided collective farmers with at least some grain (and/or potatoes). Often this was their only payment for work, since at the end of the agricultural year hardly anything was left for distribution. Thus, workdays before the harvest brought collective farmers some grain, while workdays after threshing were just lines on the paper; therefore, work on collective farms sharply reduced after threshing (Merl, 1990a; 373). The term “advanced payment” is misleading as this normally was the only payment members got from their collective farms.

As collectivization failed to ensure food supply outside urban areas, at the end of 1933, Stalin “granted” to all people living in the countryside a small plot of land (from 0.125 to 0.25 hectares) to produce some food. “Kulaks” deported to special settlements got such a plot too but not forced laborers in camps. Since 1934, almost all non-agricultural workers and employees living in the countryside had to produce part of their food, many of them also kept some livestock. Since 1939, they were also obliged to deliver some potatoes to the state as a tax in kind. Only the state officials, party members and intelligentsia were exempt from this tax (Merl, 1990a: 320–326)²⁰.

To hide the failure of collectivization and the persistent grain shortage, Stalin ordered to falsify the grain harvest statistics: since 1933, instead of the actual harvested crop (the crop in the barn), the data showed the “biological” harvest (grain ripening in the fields), which was about 30% higher, but these 30% could not be consumed or exported (Davies, 2018: 320–321).

20. In 1941, they kept 4.9 million heads of cattle (including 3.5 million cows) and 2.7 million pigs.

One of the widespread myths about Stalin's collectivization is "mechanization". In fact, at the end of the 1930s, the traction power available in Soviet agriculture in 1929 was not restored. Modernization would have required an increase in traction power, but the supply of tractors under Stalin had only partly replaced horse traction power in the 1930s. In mid-1929, the total horse traction power was 29.9 or 30.1 million (23.6 million horses, 6.1 million oxen and 35,000 tractors), at the end of 1935 — 12 million horses, 2.6 million oxen and 380,000 tractors (with 6.5 million horse powers). Depending on how mechanical traction power is converted to horse traction power, this was 60% or at best 70% of the 1929 traction power (Merl, 1990a)²¹. The supply of tractors was significantly reduced after 1937. In 1940, at best the traction power of mid-1929 was restored, more likely about 90% of it (Merl, 1990a: 44). The huge shortage of traction power determined extremely low grain yields in the 1930s, not exceeding or even below the previous level of small peasant economies. Often the quality of field work was poor (Merl, 2019: 51–53 [tables]).

Thus, traction power, despite supplies of imported tractors, decreased significantly in the early 1930s. Not the "peasant resistance" but the lack of traction power was the main reason for the poor field cultivation, and the growth of weeds created additional problems for harvesting. Imports of a large number of tractors in 1930–1931 were not planned and became necessary as the number of collective and state farms increased significantly, but there were not enough horses due to the previous lack of fodder. Imports were harmful for industrialization due to the currency shortage. In fact, nearly all currency earned from grain exports in 1930–1931 — at the peak of forced industrialization — was spent on imports of tractors as an emergency measure (Merl, 1990a: 214)²².

The number of combine harvesters had increased since the mid-1930s, but they were used mainly to control harvesting (Merl,

S. Merl

Collectivization and socialist agriculture (1917–1992):

Revised comparison of the Soviet and East-European experience.

Part I. Soviet collectivization under Stalin (1925–1953)

21. As the use of tractors is more limited (for example for transportation), normally two mechanical tractor power are equal to one horse traction power. Thus, traction power decreased to 60% at the end of 1935, if considering them as similar (1=1) — to 70%.

22. In 1930, grain exports brought in 701.5 million rubles (147 rubles per ton vs 193 in 1929), in 1931 — 523 million rubles (104 per ton). In 1930, for imports of tractors and agricultural machinery 382 million rubles were spent (vs 213 million in 1929), in 1931 — 369 million (240 million on tractors). In 1932, grain export brought in 180 million rubles, in 1933 — 139, no tractors or agricultural machinery were imported. When justifying Stalin's collectivization by high exports of grain, Kondrashin (2024: 535) ignores the fact that in 1930–1931, most of the currency earned was spent on imports of tractors and agricultural machinery.

1990a: 45)²³. Those presenting mechanization under Stalin as a success ignore how much agriculture depended on transportation previously provided by peasant carts and horse-drawn carriages. The available caterpillar tractors were not suitable for transportation, but the number of trucks in agriculture was next to zero throughout the 1930s and increased from 200 in 1931 to about 75,000 only in 1938 (Merl, 1990a: 43–45).

As the state did not pay for the work of collective farmers and prices for obligatory deliveries did not cover the costs of production, collective farms operated with losses; therefore, the state had to prevent any non-agricultural activities. Due to the extreme shortage of services in the countryside, they would have provided collective farms with income but would have stopped immediately the unprofitable agricultural production. Also processing of agricultural products was not allowed to collective farms, since the state received a significant portion of budget revenues from selling processed food.

Soviet industrialization under Stalin was strongly based on the capital transfer from agriculture. In addition, in the 1930s, Stalin introduced a state monopoly on processing agricultural products. The state sold processed products at high prices, including a turnover tax, which became the main item of budget revenues. As the tax was included in the state selling prices, it was hidden from the people. From 1934 to 1938, this tax provided up to two-thirds of the total budget revenues, after the war — more than half, after Stalin's death — about 5%–10% (Merl, 1987: 724–728)²⁴.

Under Stalin, collective farmers were treated as forced laborers, deprived of many civil rights. After the introduction of internal passports at the end of 1932, they lost freedom of mobility: to leave the collective farm to earn money, they needed permission from the local authorities. In the constitution of 1936, Stalin excluded collective farmers from the social security system. Their status became close to serfs: they had to work on collective farms without real wages, had no freedom of mobility and no social guarantees.

By the end of 1932, collectivization had been mostly completed in the grain growing areas. In 1936, the registered private farms were mostly run by the elderly producing only for own needs on a land plot of one hectare or less (Merl, 1990a: 251).

The next significant rupture in Stalin's agricultural policy was

23. On January 1, 1933, there were 2,200 combine harvesters, on January 1, 1936, — 29,336. There were mass deliveries of combine harvesters only in 1936 and 1937. On January 1, 1938, their number reached 104,864. After the start of forced collectivization, in 1930–1931, the state focused on importing threshing machines: their number increased from 2,900 in January 1931 to 27,800 in January 1932 and reached 78,000 in January 1935.

24. In the 1930s, the previous indirect tax on consumption became a “turnover tax” on processed food, directly transferred by state enterprises as “profit transfer”.

determined by the bumper harvest of 1937. Although such a good harvest could have stabilized collective farms, on the contrary, it put their further existence at risk. In 1937, collective farms in many grain growing regions for the first time collected a lot of grain during threshing. Peasants thought that the worst was over and that they could leave collective farms and return to private farming. Some collective farmers bought a horse and announced their withdrawal from the collective farm, since having a horse opened opportunities for earning money. Since collectivization and Stalin's ban on non-agricultural activities at collective farms, transportation and services were in great shortage in the Soviet countryside. Stalin was very concerned about the possible revival of private farming in the long run; therefore, he imposed restrictions. A special horse tax was introduced for individual households, and the tax was so high that it closed the possibility to make a living with one's own horse (Merl, 1990a: 156–158).

At the 18th Party congress in 1939, Stalin warned the Party members that private plots could be used to re-establish private farming if the Party would allow their "misuse". After the congress, restrictive measures were introduced: the "surplus" parts of private plots were cut off, and a minimum number of workdays was made obligatory for all members of the household. Those who did not work the minimum number of workdays lost the right to a private plot (Merl, 1990a: 295–319; Merl, 2019: 59–60).

The introduction of the obligatory minimum of workdays was to prevent collective members from working on their plots to produce products for marketing instead of working in collective-farm fields. There was no real labor shortage, the required number of workdays was very low (60–80, 100 only in the cotton growing regions), since collective farms could only offer seasonable jobs²⁵. So, the state wanted to overcome the peasants' reluctance to work for free at collective farms. Many collective farmers, especially men, looked for side jobs. Families with many dependent members (children, elderly) were in dire straits. Even hiring workers for money from neighboring collective farms was a widespread practice: collective farms were not allowed to pay their members but could pay to hired workers (Merl, 1990a: 383)²⁶.

The Party congress did not abolish the right to a private plot but significantly worsened its legal status. Before, the state tax had been equal for all plots, now a progressive tax on income from the private plot was introduced. The same taxation had been a strong

25. Non-agricultural side activities would have allowed for better use of workforce.

26. In 1940, to increase interest in working on collective farms, on Khrushchev's initiative, a decree introduced bonuses in kind for over-plan production (Merl, 1990a: 391–404).

incentive to increase production on private plots by working more intensively but it determined social differentiation. The requirement of a minimum number of workdays for every collective farmer hit the wives of Stakhanovites the most: they had not worked at collective farms before, since their husbands earned many workdays and got special rewards (Merl, 1990b: 213–233).

In July 1939, the All-Union campaign against the “misuse” of plots and a general remapping started. The land plot allowed for rural workers and employees was reduced to 0.15 hectares, and they were obliged to deliver part of their production to the state²⁷. This attack on private plots caused a new wave of slaughtering livestock and cutting down fruit trees, worsening the already insufficient food supply (Merl, 1990a: 317). In the Western regions near the Polish border and in the Baltic states, the *khutors* were ordered to be liquidated (here collective farmers still lived in isolation from each other). Taken together, all these measures were aimed at preparing for war.

After the German attack in 1941, there were rumors that collective farms would be liquidated after the War. These rumors were not officially denied so as not to jeopardize the people’s unity against the German aggressors, which underlines to what extent collective farms under Stalin were not stabilized — many members still considered them as a temporary institution and a deprivation. The victory over Germany strengthened Stalin’s dictatorship and the myth of his infallibility. Despite the catastrophic consequences of collectivization for the members of collective farms, Stalin continued to put them under heavy pressure. Re-collectivization began in the territories that were under German occupation, and in 1948 Stalin ordered to start collectivization in the annexed territories (Feest, 2014).

High taxes, repressive use of the “minimum of workdays” and further restrictions imposed on private plots made life in Soviet collective farms in 1947–1953 even more unbearable and miserable than in the second half of the 1930s. Distribution for workdays in kind and cash was lesser than in the 1930s (Bronson, Krueger, 1971). What hit collective farmers the hardest was the 1947 monetary reform which aimed at devaluing the money that collective farmers had earned and saved during the war by selling their agricultural produce.

Collective farms suffered from the lack of mechanized traction power and trailed implements. In 1950, the industrial production had already doubled its pre-war level, while the MTS only restored their

27. Remapping hit the hardest the regions with the largest outflow to the industry. In these regions, the remaining people could no longer use the left plots to produce additional fodder. In total, about 15% of plots was cut off: 50% of land of individual peasants and 30% of land of workers and employees. Most of this land was idle, since collective farms did not start to cultivate it.

prewar level of mechanization (Wädekin, 1974: 87). During the war, losses and failures (including due to the lack of spare parts and proper repairs) were high; in 1950, the statistics indicated a lot of defective machinery (Merl, 2020c: 2021).

Under Stalin, there were no signs of changes in the agricultural policy. On Khrushchev's initiative, only the enforced merging of the mostly small and village-tied collective farms began — their number decreased from 240,000 to 80,000 in the mid-1950s. This merger was based on Khrushchev's idea that larger farms would ensure economies of scale. However, general assemblies of collective farmers often did not agree to the merger, since it meant the further loss of control in favor of even more anonymous management.

Conclusion

Stalin had no collectivization concept to follow from the beginning. He started from the idea of “modernization” to establish collective farms based on the mechanized traction power on large territories. Then he changed the priority to forced industrialization and decided to get the necessary capital from agriculture. In 1929, he ordered to carry out total collectivization on the basis of peasant implements and to squeeze capital out of agriculture by subjugating peasants. For Stalin, collectivization became an end in itself. In March 1930, his concession to the rebellious peasant women became a precondition for his final approach: he gave up the idea of total liquidation of private farming and allowed collective farmers to have a private plot, a cow and some livestock. After his policy had led to the famine of 1932/33, Stalin established the “kolkhoz system” as a compromise: the peasantry gave the state control over all collective farm products, while the state created opportunities for peasants' survival through a small advanced payment in kind during threshing and a permission to use family labor on private plots. Mechanization under Stalin primarily served the state control over collective farms and peasants. He never returned to modernization of agriculture again, since it would have required the state financing of collective farms.

By creating the “kolkhoz system” based on the obligatory private plot production of collective farmers, Stalin revised his own theory that small peasant farms would not be able to ensure forced industrialization, which the further experience of collectivization in Eastern Europe proved: based on obligatory deliveries for ten years, small private farms provided capital for industrialization. The largest losses of social capital and agricultural productive forces were determined in all countries by the “class war”.

The following part will show how Soviet collectivization with extremely poor economic results was presented to Eastern Europe as a successful model for overcoming rural backwardness and financing

industrialization. After Stalin's death, there was an urgent need to find a working model for stabilizing collective farms, which together with modernization of agriculture became the key task for East Europe and the Soviet Union.

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Коллективизация и социалистическое сельское хозяйство (1917–1992): пересмотр советского и восточно-европейского опыта. Часть 1: советская коллективизация при Сталине (1925–1953)

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Аннотация. Работы о коллективизации в Восточной Европе предлагают устаревшее объяснение ее советской версии в духе сталинских определений, а исследования советской коллективизации игнорируют альтернативные возможности, которые существовали в странах с преобладанием мелких крестьянских хозяйств для форсированной индустриализации. Прежде чем рассматривать коллективизацию и социалистическую аграрную политику в Восточной Европе, автор анализирует сталинскую модель коллективизации, акцентируя внимание читателя на методологических принципах своего подхода и его центральных понятиях. Затем автор переходит к сложностям сопоставления коллективизации и социалистической аграрной политики в послевоенный период в Советском Союзе и Восточной Европе, чтобы обосновать следующие исследовательские вопросы: была ли форсированная коллективизация полезна или вредна для индустриализации; была ли сталинская модель коллективизации в принципе нацелена на модернизацию аграрного сектора; почему после ликвидации частных хозяйств в ходе коллективизации при Сталине и Хрущеве, с конца 1970-

х годов практически во всех социалистических странах государство возобновило поддержку малого сельскохозяйственного производства. Автор не только акцентирует внимание на поворотных пунктах советской аграрной политики, но и дает ей обобщенные характеристики, выделяя в ней следующие этапы на основе принципиально разных политических подходов: (1) коллективизация при Сталине — классовая война и порабощение крестьян как идеологические инструменты изъятия капитала из сельского хозяйства на нужды промышленности; (2) коллективизация при Хрущеве, стремящемся ее завершить, несмотря на первые сомнения в ее необходимости (в 1953 году в Советском Союзе и в 1957 году в ГДР и Венгрии); (3) попытки стабилизировать экономически слабые колхозы в 1960-е годы — после завершения коллективизации и смещения Хрущева; (4) последняя попытка модернизации сельского хозяйства посредством различных концепций индустриализации в 1970-е годы в надежде на экономию за счет масштаба; (5) провал этих концепций, что породило ловушку стоимости и привело к восстановлению малого сельского хозяйства в 1980-е годы. Заключительная часть статьи суммирует достижения и провалы социалистической аграрной политики по ее результатам в 1990-е годы. В первой части статьи показано, как в 1929 году Сталин устранил задачу модернизации из программы коллективизации, что превратило последнюю в самоцель и инструмент перекачки ресурсов из аграрного сектора в промышленный. Сталин не доверял крестьянам и не верил в их способность наращивать производство, поэтому колхозники были превращены в подневольных работников с ограниченными гражданскими правами. Даже механизация была призвана обеспечить государственный контроль и потому препятствовала росту урожайности.

Ключевые слова: коллективизация сельского хозяйства, Сталин, Хрущев, социалистическое сельское хозяйство, механизация, колхозная система, индустриализация сельского хозяйства, модернизация, Советский Союз, Восточная Европа, малые крестьянские хозяйства, Чаянов, экономия за счет масштаба, частные земельные наделы, социальная дифференциация, эксплуатация, миф о непогрешимости, политика «лицом к деревне»