



Peasants under siege: the collectivization of Romanian agriculture, 1949–1962

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Peasants under siege: the collectivization of Romanian agriculture, 1949–1962, by Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2011, xix + 508 pp., US\$39.50 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-6911-4973-8

In the past century, the collectivization of agriculture dramatically impacted the fate of millions of peasants from Eastern Europe to East Asia. Although the decollectivization of the 1980s and early 1990s largely eradicated the collectives, their historical legacy has continued to shape the trajectory of rural development. Moreover, as the so-called ‘failure’ of the collectives has been immensely utilized to re-establish capitalist hegemony in China and the former Eastern Bloc countries, the collectivist past has continued to constitute a theme of political debate. We therefore need more research to obtain a nuanced understanding of the collectivist experience of different countries.

There are three main strands in the academic literature on rural collectives. According to the conventional approach, like all anti-capitalist policies and systems, collectivization was a total failure primarily because it violated the principle of market-oriented, privately organized production, which is implicitly assumed to correspond with human nature. A second set of literature is critical of capitalism as well as rural collectives, seeing both as grand designs that were forced upon and violated the autonomy of the peasantry. For this approach, collectives were doomed to fail due to their utopian character and coercive imposition. Finally, there is a third strand that (partially or totally) defends the rural collectives by focusing on their positive contributions. Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery’s *Peasants under siege: the collectivization of Romanian agriculture, 1949–1962* lies somewhere between the second and third strands. It shares with the second literature a critique of forced collectivization and a problematization of the gap between official claims and the lived experience of peasants in the non-capitalist world. On the other hand, similar to the third literature, the book underscores collectives’ achievements and reflects on the unrealized historical possibilities that could have made them more successful.

Peasants under siege focuses on the collectivization process in Romania between 1949 and 1962 rather than the entire collective era that ended in 1989. It is a product of a more than decade-long cooperation of a team of Romanian and Western researchers from different disciplines including anthropology, history, sociology, law and literary criticism (461). Kligman and Verdery acknowledge other team members’ contributions and cite their reports as individual sources. The study combines team members’ ethnographic research on rural regions of the collective era with detailed archival research in order to analyze the period in all its complexity (18–39). Furthermore, although this is a single-country monograph, the authors contextualize the Romanian collectivization within the history of the Eastern Bloc with sufficient detail. The end result is a superb analysis of the Romanian case as well as the comparative historical dimensions of collectivization in the Eastern Bloc.

Among several factors that made collectivization a very difficult enterprise in Romania, two seem particularly important. Firstly, in contrast to the Russian communal village ‘which provided a plausible idiom for collectivization’, rural Romania did not have historical experience with collective forms of ownership and production (286). Consequently, while the cadres in the Soviet Union were able to collectivize entire village communities ‘via a single vote of the village council’, in Romania, they had to convince almost each and every household (81, 322). Secondly, the Romanian Communist Party (RCP) was too weak to carry out such a gigantic task. Romania’s new regime, which declared itself a ‘people’s republic’ until 1965 and a ‘socialist republic’ until its collapse in 1989, was a product of the Soviet Army rather than a worker and peasant revolution. Although the

RCP had 1 million members by 1948, many of them did not have genuine communist convictions (52). Lacking a strong internal base, the Romanian regime was too dependent on Soviet support. These factors determined the trajectory of collectivization. The Cominform's decision in 1948 in favor of a rapid push for collectivization in Romania, which reflected the policy choice of the Soviet Union, proved to be decisive for the victory of the advocates of rapid collectivization over the gradualists inside the RCP (123–7).

Despite the RCP's Soviet-backed decision of rapid collectivization, the actual policy implementation did not turn out to be very rapid. It took 13 years to complete the collectivization process. As the authors repeatedly emphasize, the strictly Stalinist line and loyalty to the Soviet Union did not prevent the RCP from deriving some useful lessons from the Soviet experience. The famine in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, which was triggered by very coercive and hasty collectivization, was interpreted by the RCP leadership as a warning against the use of an entirely identical approach. The party leaders therefore retained a certain degree of caution. Consequently, the Romanian collectivization proceeded through cycles of big pushes (in which central authorities implicitly encouraged the local cadres' use of force by not trying much to stop them) followed by reversals (in which central authorities prohibited the local cadres' use of force). For example, after the big push in the summer of 1950, no new collectives were created in 1951 and 'peasants who had been forced to join collectives were allowed to leave them' (128). External factors such as Stalin's death in 1953 and the Hungarian uprising in 1956 also prompted the party to slow down the pace of collectivization. Even after the start of the 'final assault' in late 1957, it took four more years to complete the collectivization process (102).

Throughout these cycles of pushes and reversals, the power of the party organization in the countryside determined the intensity of coercion exercised over the different sections of the peasantry. The land reform of 1945 helped the RCP to find allies among the land-poor peasantry (107), who subsequently joined collectives more willingly and in greater numbers than other peasant classes (126–7). However, the party-state's attempts to mobilize the majority of the peasantry against the rich peasants and form collectives did not succeed without the use of force. This was partly due to the embeddedness of landownership and farm labor within kinship and household networks, which were strong in the Romanian countryside (93–94, 102). Collectivization, therefore, required the disruption of these networks and the formation of new social ties based on class identities. However, a strong party organization capable of doing all these was absent in rural Romania. As Kligman and Verdery explain in Chapters 3 and 4, the party's rural cadres were lacking not only in numbers but also in political-ideological conviction. Ironically, many party members who were supposed to convince the peasants to join collectives were refusing to join themselves (289). This absence of political hegemony left coercion as the only means to carry collectivization forward. Chapters 5 and 6 explain different types of coercion (public humiliations, threats, beatings and executions) in great detail. The pace of collectivization depended almost entirely on the intensity of the use of force; 'whenever coercion was relaxed, the collectivization drive stagnated until repression reappeared' (57–8).

Coercive measures to collectivize agriculture and implement policies that aimed to prepare the ground for it (like grain quotas and agricultural taxes) were met with peasant resistance. Peasants hid grain or sold it before the arrival of collectors, hid or slaughtered animals before they could be requisitioned, weighed quota deliveries with sand, and bribed officials to reduce their quotas. They expressed their frustration with new policies through rumors (for example, that the coming Americans would soon destroy the Romanian regime), slogans, critical poetry and jokes (276–281). There were also open revolts

throughout the collectivization process, which continued for some time even after the official announcement of the completion of the collectivization process in 1962 (132).

One of the book's important findings is that despite heavy-handed repression of revolts and resistances, the Romanian regime did not entirely close its channels of communication with peasants. The most striking example in this regard is the meeting in Bucharest on 15 May 1951, in which party general secretary Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and the head of the Agrarian Section of the central committee Alexandru Moghioroş listened to three peasants' complaints about local cadres who were forcing them to join collectives; the two men reiterated the importance of voluntary collectivization, and promised to investigate the case (262–4). Peasants also utilized the mechanism of petitioning, intended by the party-state to teach peasants how to use the official discourse, to express similar frustrations (267). Although Kligman and Verdery note that consent was 'scarcely at issue in the Romanian party's survival' (210), these examples show that the risks associated with peasant resistance forced the regime to retain a certain space for the expression of peasants' grievances.

Although the express purpose of the book is explaining the collectivization process rather than the collectives' performance, the authors also briefly discuss the latter. Departing from conventional claims about the total failure of collectives everywhere, they present a nuanced account of their performance. For Kligman and Verdery, the coercive character of collectivization, devaluation of the status of farm work, and the absence of clear links between work and improvements in living standards in the eyes of the peasants reduced their motivation to work, which negatively impacted the performance of the collectives (415–43).

Nevertheless, the balance sheet of the collective system is not entirely negative. First of all, the book does not give any credit to the conventional belief that distributive land reform and smallholder production are good and collectivization is bad. The authors note that fragmentation of landholdings and decrease in the scale of production following the land reform of 1945 undermined agricultural productivity (108). Secondly, collectivization received some support from the land-poor peasants, who were the losers of the pre-existing agrarian order (126–7). Collectives provided them with stable jobs and reduced the precariousness of their everyday existence (410). Mechanization of agriculture reduced the physical burden of peasants (430–1). Interestingly, many peasants also enjoyed working in teams more than working with their family members (430–1). Similar to China, the Soviet Union and several other countries, the non-capitalist path of development expanded and democratized access to education and opened up job opportunities to previously disadvantaged groups like the poor and women, which was unimaginable in the previous order. Although agricultural work was devalued and feminized simultaneously, new educational and professional opportunities as well as their incorporation into the party and elevation to leadership positions in the collectives helped to improve women's status in Romania (410–22).

Kligman and Verdery also provide examples of successful rural collectives. One such case was the 'New Life' collective in Sântana, where a skillful local leader ignored the party's directive to exclude the German population. Since the German members of the collective conformed to the Romanian image of Germans as hard workers, their presence increased all members' motivation for working harder (392–3). The end result was a successful collective whose members did not welcome decollectivization (448). The authors remark that if the regime had provided more resources to the collectives and granted greater autonomy to farm officials, many other collectives might have performed similarly (448). I hope that Kligman and Verdery will investigate the performance of the collectives and these unrealized possibilities in greater detail in another study.

With all the qualities mentioned above, *Peasants under siege* makes an important contribution to our understanding of collectivization in Romania as well as its comparative historical dimensions.

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