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Soviet Collectivization under Stalin, 1925 to 1953

INTRODUCTION

In order to work on collectivization and the construction of socialist agriculture, it is necessary to consider the entire period, and to distinguish the following phases with basically different political approaches: 1/ collectivization under the lead of Stalin based on class war and the subjugation of the peasantry to enforce a capital transfer from agriculture to industry; 2/ collectivization under Khrushchev sticking on finishing collectivization as a target on its own, although this policy had been basically put in question: in 1953 in the Soviet Union and in 1957 in the GDR and in Hungary; 3/ the efforts to stabilize the economically still weak collective farms in the 1960s after finishing collectivization and replacing Khrushchev; 4/ the final turn to modernize agriculture by concepts of industrialized agriculture, expecting economies of scale in agriculture; and 5/ the failure of these concepts, leading into a cost trap enforcing the rehabilitation of small-scale private agriculture in the 1980s.

Upon re-examining the most recent publications on collectivization in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, I was shocked to realize the deficiencies. The contributions on collectivization in Eastern Europe often lacked information on what actually happened in the Soviet Union, relying on outdated literature

or Stalin's interpretation. Collectivization in Eastern Europe is frequently presented as a continuous process starting in 1948/49 and ending at the turn of the 1960s, ignoring the significant policy ruptures after Stalin's death. Soviet collectivization literature fails to consider other policies. I realized that comparing collectivization and socialist agricultural policy in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe[1] allows new insights into the Soviet case as well. In Eastern Europe, individual small-scale peasants coped for over a decade with compulsory deliveries and provided capital for industrialization. This disproves Stalin's affirmation that small-scale peasant farming was not even able to reproduce itself. It suggests that enforced industrialization would have worked in the Soviet Union as well, based on small-scale peasant farming, as Chayanov had suggested in the 1920s.[2] This article will have a closer look at collectivization in the Soviet Union under Stalin and combine this with some methodological reflections on the approach and central terms. The contribution touches two central questions for the assessment of socialist agricultural policy: first, whether enforced collectivization was necessary or harmful for industrialization, and second, whether Stalin's collectivization at all was directed towards the modernization of the agrarian sector. Special attention will be given to the decisive turning points of the agricultural policy.

STALIN'S COLLECTIVIZATION: A STEP TO AGRICULTURAL MODERNIZATION OR JUST A TARGET ON ITS OWN, TO SUBJUGATE THE PEASANTS AND TO BLACKMAIL CAPITAL FOR INDUSTRIALIZATION?

Under Stalin, the goal of collectivization drifted away from being a means to modernize agriculture within a socialist framework, as Lenin had seen it. It was reduced to subjugate the peasants to blackmail capital for industrialization, and became just an undertaking of social engineering to change the rural society in the desired direction.[3] Paying special attention to the economic aspects, I will show that Stalin's collectivization was harmful to the goal of modernizing agriculture and to the Soviet Union's economic development.

In the anthology on Collectivization in Eastern Europe, edited by Constantin Irodachi and Arnd Bauerkämper, Lynne Viola contributed the chapter on the Soviet Union.[4] She provides, however, no accurate description of Stalin's

1 The term Eastern Europe in this article is used for the Eastern and Central European countries (including the GDR) under communist rule.
2 Chayanov, Pis'mo. Merl, Was Chayanov's concept.
3 Bauerkämper and Irodachi, The Collectivization, 6.
4 Viola, Collectivization.

collectivization policy with all its errors and corrections, necessary for a fruitful comparison. Instead, she feasted on lofty statements and remote theoretical categorizations. Thus, she refers to James Scott's »high modernism« and Zygmunt Bauman's »gardening state«.[5] This sounds academic but lacks any practical usefulness for the comparison. She claims that collectivization primarily aimed to change the nature of the peasants (whatever this means) and did not follow economic purposes, blaming Moshe Lewin's emphasis on »taking grain« as too narrow. She speaks of a »colony« status of the countryside assuring and rationalizing its plunder[6]: »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.«[7] Working on the topic for more than 50 years, I never found a hint that Stalin assessed the members of a collective farm as »new« men. He trusted them no more than any other peasant. Viola's focus on »resistance« is also of little help in understanding Stalin's exploitation of the peasants. Instead of speaking of »resistance«, we should not ignore that the members of collective farms under Stalin had to fight for their naked survival. Instead of checking such assessments critically, Viola presents the secret police reports on »heavy resistance of the *kulaks*« and »sabotage by the peasants« as if they tell the truth.[8] Some of her statements are misleading. Thus, she claims that collectivization was an »integral component of Stalin's First Five-Year-Plan«,[9] but even the final version of the plan in May 1929 did not see collectivization as a precondition for industrialization, suggesting starting it only in 1933, when the Soviet industry would be able to produce tractors domestically.[10]

Recent research on Soviet collectivization often ignores our current knowledge of Stalin's actions and interventions, more concretely, how strongly Stalin shaped Soviet collectivization, and his interpretations are presented as if they were correct.[11] I will give detailed information on Stalin's interference by looking at the ruptures of his collectivization policy between 1924 and 1953. He has

5 Ibidem, 63.

6 Ibid., 50, 54, 68.

7 Ibid., 64. Collectivization had been inspired by – »rational planning«, aiming to – »human betterment« (Zygmunt Bauman).

8 Viola, Collectivization, 55–56. She states that the destruction of traditional elites, in the parlance of the time the »liquidation of the kulak as a class«, was »a composite – and indeed requisite – measure« (55).

9 Viola, Collectivization, 49.

10 *Pyatiletnii plan*, 338. Merl, Handlungsspielräume, 184–211. The final plan suggested 13% collectivization for 1933. Viktor P. Danilov correctly argued that this plan from May 1929 presented the alternative: a quick industrialization without forced collectivization – Kollektivizatsiya.

11 Cf., for example, most recently, Kondrashin, *Rossiiskaya derevnya*.

changed his approach several times radically. Underestimating Stalin's role and his continuous interventions in collectivization leads to misinterpretations. We are today better able to understand what was behind Stalin's actions. Especially, Robert (Bob) W. Davies contributed to this by accurately describing how Stalin acted in the economic policy based on the archive material.[12] Davies demonstrates that Stalin reacted differently to the poor harvest of 1936 than he did in 1932/33, although in this year the grain shortage was even more severe.[13] He is able to hint at Stalin's motives and reflections. We learn about Stalin's way of decision making (cautious or pressing ahead), and about his understanding of the situations. Whenever his dictatorial rule was put in question, Stalin reacted very sensibly and effectively.[14]

Sometimes Stalin's acting suggested that he had doubts and was not sure what to do. As he normally pushed things ahead with exercising extreme pressure on the officials to over-fulfill the set targets, it is important to pay attention to situations in which he acted differently: sometimes he interrupted campaigns or suddenly acted with more caution and even set moderate goals. This happened, for example, in March 1930 with collectivization, in 1931 in reaction to the crisis of industrialization, in late 1932 during the famine, and with the end of the »Great Terror« in 1938[15]. In these cases, Stalin set temporary more moderate goals, as, for example, for the Second Five-Year-Plan, or even sought a compromise, as in the end of 1932, with the members of the collective farms in response to the famine. When the danger was overcome, Stalin often returned to accelerate the tempo and newly exerted extreme pressure on the officials.

My approach is primarily interested in the economic aspects of collectivization and »socialist agriculture« and the goal of agricultural modernization. Lenin expected that small-scale peasants would voluntarily join collective farms out of fear of economic ruin, as Marxist theory suggested. In his view, providing tractors (mechanical traction power) would directly convince the peasants. For Lenin, the modernization aspect stood in the center, not exploiting the peasants for financing industrialization as under Stalin. Interestingly, Lenin paid no special attention to the strong rural underemployment.

12 Especially the final four volumes of his industrialization series, written based on access to the archive material, provide important insights in Stalin's acting: Davies, *The industrialisation of Soviet Russia 4;* Davies and Wheatcroft, *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia 5*; Davies, *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia 6*; Davies, Harrison, Khlevnyuk, and Wheatcroft, *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia 7*.

13 Davies, *The Industrialisation of Soviet Russia 6*.

14 Merl, Trägt Baberowskis Gewaltansatz.

15 Ibid. Stalin blamed Ezhov for the Great Terror and ordered his execution, even though we now know from the archives that Stalin gave each order himself.

My contribution draws on the collectivization experience in Eastern Europe to gain a better understanding of alternative solutions in the Soviet case. The standard approach goes in the opposite direction, comparing collectivization in Eastern Europe with the »Soviet model«, not understanding that such a model did not exist. Until now, very few studies have looked in detail at the whole experience of Socialist agricultural policy (collectivization and constructing socialist agriculture) between 1924 and 1992. Only such a comprehensive perspective allows a profound reassessment.[16] I will begin with some methodological remarks on the use of the sources and then examine the myths surrounding the achievements of collectivization, which are still prevalent in present-day literature.

METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS ON THE USE OF SOURCES

Archival material and other sources from the time under Stalin present the »official« interpretation, following Stalin's view, and not the »truth«. As Merle Fainsod demonstrated in his study on Smolensk, there is no discernible difference between the published and archival materials.[17] Every »fact« or interpretation, therefore, needs critical checking. In recent publications, however, not only do young and inexperienced historians use the archive material uncritically and present what they find there as the »truth«.[18] What the secret policy reports present as sabotage, terror acts, and resistance in reality often were only reactions to attacks by the regime and not independent acts against the regime.[19] Thus, most horses and cows perished inside the collective farms due to the lack of fodder or epidemics, and not due to »peasant resistance«. [20] In any case, it is necessary to verify whether the other reasons provided are possible and plausible. Fighting desperately for survival should not be classified as resistance.

The officials manipulated their reports in reaction to the pressure put on them first by Stalin and then by Khrushchev. For fear of their job, they reported what they expected Stalin or Khrushchev wanted to hear. They presented alleged culprits who could be held responsible in public for mistakes and errors. By exerting such pressure on the officials, Stalin and then Khrushchev lost the opportunity to receive honest reports, which would have described the situation as drastic and

16 For contributions, having the whole relevant period in Russia and the Soviet Union in view, see: Merl, Reassessment; Merl, Why the Soviet Union, Vol. 5.

17 Fainsod, *Smolensk*.

18 Cf. Kondrashin, *Rossiiskaya derevnya*; Viola, Collectivization.

19 During my research in the mid–1970s, I checked the information on what the archival material classifies as »terror acts« by *kulaks*. Most were merely acts of revenge against previous acts of state terror perpetrated against the actors.

20 On the perishing of cattle, see below.

miserable as it was. Many recent contributions overlook the extensive research on Soviet collectivization conducted in the 1970s and 1980s.[21]

Stalin never confessed his own mistakes (or miscalculations), not even to his closest companions. Blaming others opened him the opportunity to change his policy, while he publicly denied the policy change. This was his strategy to construct the myth of his infallibility already at the beginning of the 1930s.[22] To keep dictatorial rule, Stalin's actions had to be unpredictable or uncalculable to others.[23] He consistently presented others as scapegoats in public. He often ordered the killing or execution of those who had warned him, as happened in 1932 with Mikhail Volf, the vice minister of state farms, who had explained in mid-1928 why collectivization could cause a famine.[24]

Khrushchev's approach was somewhat different. Stalin maintained the myth of his infallibility by being as cautious as possible with his public statements. This allowed him to adjust his policy in the event of failure or danger, thereby avoiding being held responsible for mistakes. Khrushchev, on the contrary, often made foolish promises in public. As he connected his person with these promises, he was seen as the responsible person in the case of failure, as with his promise to surpass the US in the per capita consumption of milk and meat by 1961. He, therefore, could not blame others for being responsible.[25]

WHAT MYTHS EXIST ON THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF COLLECTIVIZATION?

The »class differentiation« of the Russian peasantry

The »class differentiation« of the Russian peasantry was a myth, although there was social differentiation.[26] In none of the East European countries had a capitalist »class differentiation« developed, in some countries, however, a class differentiation between noble estate owners and land workers existed. Convincing criteria to determine who was an »exploiting« farmer did not exist.[27] The seasonal

21 I would like to mention especially: Danilov, *Sozdanie*; Danilov, *Sovetskaya dokolkhoznaya derevnya: naselenie;* Danilov, *Sovetskaya dokolkhoznaya derevnya: sotsialnaya struktura;* Jasny, *Socialized Agriculture*; Lewin, *Russian Peasants*; Karcz, Agriculture; Millar, Mass Collectivization; Millar and Nove, A Debate; Hunter, Soviet Agriculture; Kollektivizatsiya; *Tragediya*. Cf. Also Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*; Viola, *The Best Sons*; Viola, *The Unknown Gulag*. On the discussion about collectivization under Perestroika, see: Merl, Kollektivierung.

22 Cf. my comment on Stalin's »dizziness of success« in Merl, Stalin.

23 Gregory, *The Political Economy.* Merl, Sovetskaya ekonomika. Merl, Trägt Baberowskis Gewaltansatz.

24 Merl, Der Holodomor. On Volf, see also below, notes 45 and 74.

25 Merl, Entstalinisierung.

26 Merl, *Der Agrarmarkt*. Chayanov, Pis'mo. Shanin, *The Awkward Class*.

27 Merl, *Der Agrarmarkt*. Swain, Eastern European Collectivization.

hiring of laborers during the peak harvest season was a widespread practice. Only in some countries with a developed peasantry, such as Germany, did farmers use hired laborers permanently, typically one farmhand and one maid.

Two other forms of »exploitation«, however, played a role everywhere during collectivization: The exploitation of the peasants by the state, and the »self-exploitation« of small-scale peasants. Exploitation by the state was the key feature of collectivization under Stalin. Dictating the producer prices, the state controlled the income of the collective farms and disposed of their products without considering reproduction. »Self-exploitation« was a widespread practice of small-scale peasant agriculture. The peasants used »family labor« in their production, having no fixed value as work against wages in the socialist industry. Family labor was provided without calculating the average salary or the time worked.[28]

»Modernization by mechanization« under Stalin?

Modernization would have required more than just providing tractors, and since the mid-1930s, combine harvesters. The crucial questions are, first, whether traction power during the 1930s at all surpassed or restored the level reached in 1929, that means, whether mechanical traction power did more than partly substitute the animal traction power, destroyed by »taking grain«, and second: whether use was made of the available agricultural knowledge and technology (as crop rotation), to rise plant yields and animal performance substantially. For collectivization under Stalin, the answer to both questions is no. Mechanical traction power during the 1930s did not fully replace the animal traction power of 1929. Mechanization pursued the goal of controlling agricultural production and even sabotaged the introduction of improved crop rotations.[29] The import of tractors and heavy agricultural machinery was halted in 1932, marking the commencement of domestic production at the Stalingrad Tractor Factory. But tractors under Stalin could be used only for a limited number of field work as there was a very short supply of trailed implements. Already in 1937, due to Stalin's shift in focus to military defense, further supplies of tractors and fuel were reduced. A significant portion of the Machine-tractor stations' (MTS) tractors were out of order due to a lack of spare parts and poor repair. All attempts in the 1930s to increase agricultural production by seed rotation and elementary measures (agro-minimum) were blocked by Stalin's insistence on a large sown area under grain.[30]

28 Swain, *Collective Farms*.

29 Merl, Kak udalos' Stalinu. Merl, Why did the Attempt. On the mechanization during the 1930s, cf. below.

30 Merl, Kak udalos' Stalinu. Merl, Why did the Attempt.

COLLECTIVIZATION UNDER STALIN: THE DECISIVE TURNING POINTS OF HIS POLICY TOWARDS COLLECTIVIZATION, 1925 TO 1953

Stalin's interest in collectivization started with his decision to enforce industrialization in 1926.

In the following, I will describe in detail how and why Stalin's concept of collectivization was formed, paying special attention to the many ruptures of his approach, which started from »taking grain« and led to the subjugation of the former peasants as forced laborers without payment to provide capital for industrialization.

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

Unlike Stalin's dogmatic version, the land reform in 1917 was not ordered from above. The peasants started to occupy estate land already under the Provisional Government. They ran this »revolution« against the land-owning nobles on their own. While the Bolsheviks initially intended to transform the estates directly into large-scale state farms, Lenin decided to win the peasants' support for the revolution by taking over a law project, developed based on peasant electoral mandates by the left wing of the Social Revolutionaries, tolerating the independent acting of the peasants with seizing the landowners' land.[31]

Reacting to the harvest failure in 1924 and the bad mood of the rural population toward the new regime, the Bolsheviks developed their own agricultural program. The policy of turning one's face to the countryside (*Litsom k derevne*) aimed to overcome the fundamental problem of underemployment in the rural workforce. It proposed to provide incentives to the farmers to create new jobs in the countryside, to improve agricultural techniques to raise yields and animal productivity and focused on organizing the peasant farms – as after 1904 – in cooperatives. Developing agriculture should raise the means for capital transfer to industrialize the country. The state should support cooperatives in providing credits, inputs, processing, and marketing to farmers.[32]

All the proposed measures were well-founded. However, the intention to start with accumulating capital in agriculture to then finance industrialization would not have allowed for quick industrialization. *Litsom k derevne* was not a program of industrialization, but a feasible program to develop peasant agriculture.

31 Merl, Traditionalistische Widersetzlichkeit. Merl, Dekret.
32 Merl, Was Chayanov's concept. Wehner, *Bauernpolitik.*

In this regard, it had no alternative. The speed of agricultural development would depend on the state's willingness to provide finances and accept social differentiation in the countryside. As long as the peasant farms were not hindered by their capability to produce, they would more or less quickly increase production and improve farming. Even under unfavorable market conditions, they would not have an alternative to take the burden and provide capital for industrialization. This is evident from the collectivization experience in the Eastern European countries between 1948 and 1962 (see my second article). The capital transfer could be managed by the price policy in connection with compulsory deliveries. As long as the state did not exercise violence, the risk of destroying means of production was negligible, and the peasants would have had to go on with agricultural production, lacking other sources of income.[33]

In the mid-1920s, a plan for developing agriculture during the First Five-Year-Plan was formulated. The group around Chayanov (Nikolai Kondratiev, Nikolai Makarov, and Alexander Chelintsev) was involved and prepared projects for the industrialization of agriculture, starting with vertical cooperation. Collectivization should be placed on the agenda when domestic production of tractors can begin and a mechanized agricultural technique is provided from 1933 onward.[34]

Litsom k derevne was based on the revision of the concept of »class differentiation«. The *kulturniki* were categorized as part of the »working peasants«, as they would get rich not by exploiting others (like the pre-capitalist *kulaks*) but by their own work. Even if they employed a temporary land-worker in addition to their family labor, they were not seen as *kulaks*. Chayanov spoke of a new generation of peasants, who emerged during World War and the Civil War, standing loyal to Soviet power. *Litsom k derevne* intended to support these *kulturniki*, seen as peasants willing to improve their farming methods and utilize scientific knowledge, to increase and intensify production.[35]

When grain procurement at the beginning of the 1925/26 campaign went slower than expected, Stalin attacked the peasants and blamed them for »sabotaging« grain procurement and thus industrialization. He urged the Party to revive the concept of »class war« in the countryside. His accusation of the peasants was not justified; until the end of the procurement campaign in the spring of 1926, the expected amount of grain was collected. As the state had dictated lower

33 Merl, *Der Agrarmarkt*. Merl, Was Chayanov's concept.

34 Merl, Was Chayanov's concept.

35 Chayanov, Pis'mo. In his 1927 recommendations to Molotov, he stressed the basic points, neglected under Stalin: the need to provide state financial support for the start of agricultural modernization, the need to invest in agricultural research and in the qualification of the agricultural producers to improve farming, and autonomy for the peasants to decide on the best use of the human capital and the means of production by themselves.

grain prices, the capital transfer from agriculture to industry in 1926/27 was significant. The peasants had no alternative but to sell their grain to the state and thus had to accept low prices.[36]

Stalin's return to the concept of »class war« in 1926/27 was an attack against the *kulturniki* promoted by other members of the Party leadership. Disenfranchisement for the election to the soviets in 1927 was widened, and a special »individual taxation« was introduced for the wealthiest three percent of the peasants.[37] Although the available data show that »exploitation« of poor peasants by *kulaks* was hardly existent in the Soviet countryside, and that there was not yet a capitalist stratification, Stalin stuck to his attack against the well-to-do peasants. Other leading Party members tried to defend them, as the increase in agricultural production would significantly depend on their work; they ordered the exemption of *kulturniki* from individual taxation and the return of the right to vote for the local soviets to them.[38]

Although the decision to accelerate industrialization and not wait for accumulated capital in agriculture was unavoidable, a combination of forced industrialization and promoting peasant farms would have been feasible. Setting unfavorable producer prices for agricultural goods would have been possible, as long as no direct attack against the well-to-do peasants took place. They would have increased their production and improved their farming to reduce their burden. Stalin's attack on the well-to-do farmers also affected those rural households that lacked sufficient implements and animal traction power to cultivate their fields independently and relied on leasing means of production.[39] Frightened to be classified and expropriated as *kulaks* and »class enemies«, the well-to-do peasants and the *kulturniki* reacted to Stalin's attack by stopping what was classified as exploitation: lending out farm implements or horse traction power, widely practiced before in the grain-producing regions. Hiring labor, however, hardly existed: only 0.5% of the farms in the Soviet countryside hired labor.[40]

A feasible alternative to securing the state procurement of grain for export to obtain the currency to finance industrialization would also have been the return to a tax in kind, as introduced by Lenin in 1921. In the mid-1920s, however, nobody was thinking about this solution. The tax in kind had provided the state with the amount of grain over which the state wanted to dispose. But in 1924, it was substituted by a money tax, as the costs of procuring and storing the grain

36 Merl, *Der Agrarmark,* 123–40. Merl, Stalins Irrweg.
37 Merl, Was Chayanov's concept. Merl, Stalins Irrweg.
38 Merl, *Der Agrarmarkt*. Merl, Was Chayanov's concept.
39 Merl, Was Chayanov's concept.
40 Merl, *Der Agrarmarkt*, 424–37.

seemed too high.[41] It should take until the end of 1932 for Stalin to decide to return to such a tax in kind with the introduction of compulsory deliveries, but he denied that he copied Lenin.

At the July Plenum of the Central Committee in 1928, Stalin claimed that the peasants would have to render a tribute for industrialization, taking over Yevgeni Preobrazhensky's concept (after his exclusion from the Party) of »primary socialist accumulation«. In 1929, Stalin transferred this claim to collectivization, ordering the organization of collective farms based on the peasants' existing farm implements.[42]

In his approach to the peasants, Stalin did not know any other way than to exercise violence, although he never spoke out about it in public. He preferred to exercise pressure on his officials, leaving them no alternative but to use force against the peasants if they did not risk being repressed themselves.

At the beginning of 1928, Stalin intervened personally in the slow running of the grain procurement campaign. Just before, the Party had, for the 10th anniversary of the revolution in November 1917, given the poor peasants as an award the privilege to pay less taxes. This had reduced the pressure on them to market their grain and contributed to a decrease in state grain procurement. Traveling to the Urals and Siberia, Stalin put the local officials there under severe pressure. He reestablished the procurement dictatorship as it was practiced under War Communism. In January 1928, he ordered the exercise of force for grain procurement and to expropriate stored grain (even from millers). Local markets were closed. This had fatal consequences for the domestic grain supply. In the spring of 1928, it even became necessary to import grain.[43]

In his article »On the grain front«, Stalin claimed that grain marketing in comparison to the prewar level was cut by half. He blamed the small-scale peasant farms for not being able to provide enough market grain. His data, however, included only grain exports and grain consumption in urban areas. It ignored that the peasants living in the »grain consumption zone« in the central and northern part of the country also consumed marketed grain, often transported over hundreds of kilometers. Including their consumption, grain marketing was only 20% below the prewar level. This corresponded to the still lower gross grain harvest and the increase in the rural population.[44]

41 Merl, Beschluss.
42 Merl, Stalins Irrweg. Merl, Agricultural reforms.
43 Merl, Stalins Irrweg. Merl, Agricultural reforms. Merl, *Der Agrarmarkt.*
44 Merl, *Der Agrarmarkt*. Also cf. Merl, Stalins Irrweg, and Merl, Agricultural reforms.

The collectivization campaign of early 1928 and the subsequent decision against the voluntary establishment of dwarf collective farms

In early 1928, as the state exerted pressure on grain procurement, the first collectivization campaign began. The state promised peasants willing to organize a collective farm to provide a tractor for each new farm. This was attractive for rural households with land but without the necessary implements, especially after Stalin's return to class war had made it difficult to find a peasant willing to rent out implements and animal traction power. Although, in the spring of 1928, only about 1% of the peasants organized in collective farms, the state was unable to keep its promise; only one of hundreds of new collective farms received a tractor. The number of tractors was minimal, as nearly all had to be imported, and imports had been strongly reduced in 1926.

In a letter, published by the »Pravda« in June 1928, some peasants from Samara described how they could imagine the transfer to large-scale farming: they proposed »peasant-state farms« instead of collective farms. The state should take over command of production on these farms, but pay the members very modest monthly wages for their work. They touched the core of the problem with collectivization: how to allow the members to survive under conditions of strong rural underemployment. For the government, Mikhail Volf, busy with working out the Five-Year-Plan for agriculture, answered in the »Pravda« in July to the proposal of the peasants. He hinted at the problem that mechanization would further reduce the labor input needed in agricultural production, thereby exacerbating the issue of rural underemployment. He stated that it would be necessary to develop new, more labor-intensive production branches in agriculture to cope with the surplus of the workforce in the countryside, in order to avoid famine in the future.[45]

In the summer of 1928, the Party leadership evaluated the results of the collectivization campaign. They came to a clear conclusion: nobody needed such small collective farms with just a few members, holding no farm implements and managing widely split land allotments. The Party leaders decided that the scarce tractors should be provided only to collective farms with large land allotments. The organization of such large-scale farms should be done from above by organizations capable of running tractors and tractor columns.

From now on, collective farms with tractors were organized from above, and the principle of voluntary joining was increasingly manipulated and substituted

45 Der Bauernsowchos. In: Merl (ed.), *Sowjetmacht und Bauern*, 487–94. Volf later became the vice Minister of state farms.

by the exercise of pressure. To get the large fields necessary for using tractor columns, all or nearly all members of a village commune had to join. To put pressure on them, those refusing to join were offered fields at a great distance from the village. In response to the pressure exerted by Stalin from above, this decision led to the initiation of a bureaucratic competition among organizations capable of organizing agricultural production with tractors: Khlebotsentr[46], Kolkhoztsentr[47], and Traktortsentr[48]. They all wanted to get the scarce tractors, but only the projects promising the largest number of peasant farms and hectares to be included had a chance.

The competition to acquire tractors intensified when regional party organizations were required to develop their own five-year-plans in 1929. Under the general pressure from Stalin to overfulfill the plans set from above, all started extremely ambitious plans far from reality, and promised to end wholesale collectivization in an always shorter time to get all tractors (about two out of some thousand rayons had a chance to get tractors) and declared themselves to »rayons of wholesale collectivization.«[49]

The reasonable Party decision of the summer of 1928, coupled with the pressure from above, had crazy consequences. The lack of tractors alone pushed the promised rate of collectivization up. It was a competition between bureaucratic organizations. In trying to implement their plans, they consistently pressured the peasants more harshly. As the pressure increased and the farmers had to join against their will, it became a normal picture that after signing a contract, the males went off to find work in industry, as on their fields, now »steel horses« took over work.[50]

To halt this intense competition and to align the number of organized large-scale farms with the available tractors, intervention from above would have been necessary. However, Stalin continued to accelerate the pace of collectivization. Neither he nor Molotov was willing to stop this »revolutionary process«.[51]

46 All-Russian union of agricultural cooperatives for the production, processing and sale of grain and oil-seeds.

47 All-Union council of the collective farms.

48 All-Union council of the Machinery-Tractor-Stations.

49 Merl, *Die Anfänge*, 370–80. Kolkhoztsentr and some other organizations, however, suggested a higher speed than the Five-Year-Plan. They explained the need to establish large–scale collective farms to secure market grain for the state. They expected that the state would take over a significant share of costs. When the state reduced its share to 0.73 billion rubles, they simply increased the share to be provided by the peasants from the initially calculated 30% to 48%.

50 Some of the projects initially got big publicity, that of the Sevchenko state farm in Ukraine, for example, organizing the peasants with the help of tractor columns – Merl, *Die Anfänge*; Merl, Stalins Irrweg.

51 Merl, Handlungsspielräume. Merl, *Die Anfänge.*

Stalin's decision to start the process of mass collectivization based on peasant implements (1928/29)

Obviously, under the impression of reports suggesting little peasant resistance to collectivization, Stalin decided to initiate mass collectivization based on existing peasant implements. This required the middle peasants, holding farm implements, to join. Instead of receiving tractors from the state, the collective farms should now work based on the peasants' means of production. In other words, the middle peasants should be expropriated after joining the collective farms.[52]

In his speeches, Stalin now talked of a »drive« of the middle peasants to join collective farms. This put intense pressure on the officials: they had to provide what Stalin only claimed, to push the unwilling middle peasants into these farms. This increased their pressure and violence against the peasants even further. At the same time, the already small amount of money planned for investments into agriculture was further cut.[53] Although this meant that all state finances should be allocated to industrialization, state propaganda went on to present collectivization as the mechanization of agricultural production using tractors. At the same moment, the planning of agro-industrial complexes went on, and massive state farms were organized. Ultimately, none of these projects received the necessary state financing.[54]

To reserve all state finances for industrialization and to collectivize based on peasant implements was Stalin's personal decision. This suggests that »taking grain« for financing industrialization – different from what Viola claims[55] – was his main motive behind his decision to collectivize. He expected that »taking grain« from the collective farms would be easier than from a large number of individual peasants. Grain exports should provide the currency for financing industrialization.[56] And Stalin went on to stress that plans were not binding but had to be overfilled as much as possible.

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

At the 1929 November Plenum, Stalin ordered the start of wholesale collectivization. The worker brigades, standing in the countryside to take the grain, should participate. And he sent 25,000 skilled industrial workers and Party

52 Merl, Stalins Irrweg.
53 Merl, Was Chayanov's concept. Wehner, *Bauernpolitik.*
54 Merl, Handlungsspielräume, 365–69.
55 Viola, Collectivization, 68. Lewin, »Taking Grain«.
56 Merl, *Die Anfänge,* 370–400. Kondrashin, *Rossiiskaya derevnya.*

members to the countryside. They should undergo a two-week schooling and then take over to run a collective farm.[57] Stalin was convinced that for running a large-scale agricultural farm, different from industry, special knowledge would not be necessary. He did not mention that private plots should be kept in the collective farms.

In this campaign, voluntariness no longer played a role. The Party now set on a seemingly democratic voting by communication among those present to construct liability. This technique had first been used in early 1928 to make the peasants vote for »self-taxation«, ordered by the state, within their village communes. All members of the village were required to attend the meeting, now convened and run by state officials (instead of the village elder). Outsiders, secret policemen, and members of worker brigades participated to intimidate those attending from openly expressing their opinions. To establish liability, every member of the village commune was required to be present during the voting process. In the meeting, the organization of a collective farm stood on the agenda. Initially, it was possible to hear different perspectives. But by the voting in the end, everybody had to agree, »convinced« by the arguments of the officials. Those present are aware that any dissenting vote would have consequences and would likely result in punishment, at the very least, including arrest. Sometimes, the chairman of the gathering cut things short and put directly to a vote, »Who is against Soviet power?« When nobody dared to say »I am«, he would summon, »The establishment of the collective farm is unanimously accepted.« Through this manipulation of the peasants' vote, even those opposed were included in a binding decision, as they were present during the ballot without openly protesting.[58]

The officials had no real chance to convince the peasants of the advantages of collective farming, as it was obvious to everybody that they did not exist. The peasants knew how miserable such farms were. If they failed to »convince« the peasants, Stalin blamed the officials for being unable to fulfill their job and replaced them. With this pressure, Stalin reached both: that the officials reported »successes« to him, and that they pushed collectivization ahead by always increasing pressure on the peasants, frightening them by making use of the existing enemy pictures of »sabotage«, declaring them to be counterrevolutionaries or to be *kulaks*.

With his speech in December 1929 to the Conference of Marxist Agricultural Scientists, Stalin made crucial decisions about the final nature of Soviet collective farms, even as the campaign of wholesale collectivization was already underway. He now changed the classification of the collective farms. Previously, he had

57 Merl, *Sozialer Aufstieg*, 73–90. Viola, *The Best Sons*.
58 Merl, *Politische Kommunikation*, 28–29, 64–72.

categorized them as a »transitional type«; now, he referred to them as a »socialist form of production«. This had a repressive meaning: as »socialist forms«, the collective farms lost the possibility to disagree with state orders. Not fulfilling state orders from now on 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 the *kulaks*. They should not be admitted to collective farms. Previously, in the Soviet case, and subsequently in some Eastern European countries, several officials had proposed admitting *kulaks* under strict conditions. Some *kulaks* had already been admitted after giving all their property to these farms in the hope that this would open up a chance of survival for them. Now they were no longer allowed to enter. Stalin announced the »liquidation of the *kulaks* as a class«. The Central Committee decreed their liquidation on January 30, 1930.[59] Many of those peasants, whom the Party had praised before as *kulturniki*, shared the fate of the *kulaks*.

The order to arrest the *kulaks* and deport their families was the most effective measure to force the other peasants into the collective farms. Due to the vague criteria given, every peasant could be declared to be a *kulak* or a *podkulak*. The share of peasant farms registered as members of collective farms went up from 20% to 59% between January and March 10, 1930.

In his speech to the Marxist agricultural scientists, Stalin claimed that petty peasant farms were unable to secure even simple reproduction in agriculture. The extent to which Stalin lost ground in his attitude toward the petty peasants with this claim is evident from the subsequent collectivization experience in Eastern Europe. It convincingly proved that small-scale peasant farms could secure reproduction even under unfavorable conditions set by compulsory deliveries and attacks from above during the class war. In the Eastern European countries, most small-scale peasants resisted for over a decade under this extreme pressure. During this time, their economic results were even better than those of the collective farms around them, subsidized by the state (see my second article). This suggests that financing industrialization would have also worked in the Soviet Union based on small peasant farms, against Stalin's claim that large-scale enterprises, even if they work with peasant implements in the present »manufacturer period of the collective farms« would be superior.

On January 5, 1930, the Central Committee decreed that collectivization should be further accelerated and the deadlines shortened. It distinguished between three regions, newly showing to what extent collectivization headed to get grain for export: collectivization in the main grain producing regions should be finished first: in the Lower and the Middle Volga regions and the North Caucasus

59 Merl, *Bauern*, 61–103.

already in the fall of 1930 or in the spring of 1931, in all other grain producing regions between the fall of 1931 and the spring of 1932, and in all other regions until the end of the First Five-Year-Plan (in 1933).[60] This decree did not mention the delivery of tractors.

At the time Stalin ordered the start of wholesale collectivization at the November Plenum, no final statute existed. It was only in December 1929 that the Yakovlev Commission was established to draft the *Kolkhoz* statute. On the recommendation of this commission, the Central Committee, on January 5, 1930, spoke of the *artel*[61] as the normal statute, but still classified it as a »transitional form«. This suggested that only the commune would be the final form. Socialization should include everything that provides commodity production. Speaking of the *artel* as a transitional form in a time with extreme pressure on the officials to »overfill« every order, was understood to organize communes directly. Stalin personally contributed to this understanding when a preliminary version of the *artel* statute, published on February 6, 1930, and personally approved by him, no longer mentioned a private plot and a private cow.[62] It thus did not come as a surprise that several officials started to expropriate even small domestic animals and poultry. This suggests that Stalin did not expect serious resistance to the collectivization and was well aware of what acting on the »dizziness of success« meant.

January – February 1930: The peasant women's uprising (babi bunty)

With the collectivization campaign widespread, the private farms were fully liquidated, and the cows were expropriated. Uprisings of peasant women against the expropriation »of the cow« started and turned into a mass movement in February 1930. The females attacked the regional centers of state power with their traditional arms: sickles, pitchforks, and scythes. In some rural districts, the Soviet regime lost control.[63] The fact caused a strong reaction from the women, as the loss of the cow threatened the family's survival. Primarily, women led the resistance as they had less to fear. While men risked direct arrest or being shot on the spot, the regime did not dare to touch the women in this way, declaring the

60 Merl, *Die Anfänge*, 377.

61 A traditional Russian term used before for semiformal associations of peasants leaving their village for seasonal jobs as workers in the cities or as hunters, organizing themselves and living together at the place of work far from home.

62 Merl, *Die Anfänge*, 396–99.

63 Ibid., 148–53. The uprisings became more widespread in the fall of 1929 and turned into a mass movement at the beginning of 1930.

mothers of most Red Army soldiers to be counter-revolutionaries, saboteurs, or enemies of the people. In all cases, the male behind the uprising had to be found, who could be repressed as a *kulak* or »priest«. The Red Army could not be used to fight against the uprisings. Only the secret police could be used, but in a limited way.

Only now did Stalin realize that the campaign to accelerate collectivization by fully liquidating private farms had created a critical situation and endangered his rule. He was deeply concerned about the rapidly spreading uprisings of women peasants against the »collectivization of the cow«. The chaos caused threatened the start of the forthcoming spring sowing campaign. Stalin understood that he had to act immediately.

Although he himself was responsible for the actions of the officials, which led to the total liquidation of private farms, Stalin decided to blame them and calm the situation by emphasizing the voluntary nature of joining collective farms. Most importantly, he conceded to the peasant women by allowing them to keep a private cow and plot of land after joining the *artel*. To reach the peasant women directly, his article »Dizzy with Success« was published in »Pravda« of March 2, 1930, together with the revised and now final version of the *artel* statute, conceding a private plot, a cow, and some animals after joining.[64]

With Stalin's interventions, the Party and the state quickly regained control. As he fulfilled the main requests of the peasant women, the uprisings broke down within a few days. Formally, some officials were arrested and judged. However, the consequences for collectivization were severe: the registered rate of collectivization declined from 59% in early March to approximately 20% by June 1930. Several »collective farms« disappeared. Exiting the collective farms was still easy in March and April 1930 because, in most cases, the actual organization had not yet begun. The 1930 spring sowing, and accordingly the harvesting of these fields in the fall of 1930, was mostly done individually. Stalin's responsibility for the »abuses« was out of question. He had put the officials under pressure to speed up the complete collectivization. Acting on the »success« reports addressed to him, »Dizzy with Success« perfectly described what had pushed him ahead.

Blaming the officials of all abuses, Stalin acted differently from Lenin in 1921; to build up the myth of his infallibility, he did not confess any of his own errors or failures. His reaction in March 1930 set the precedent for how he would handle future crises and threats to his rule. He denied his own responsibility and even claimed that he had not changed his course at all. Also in March 1930, his intervention was combined with a temporary, rather tactical retreat, and a permanent

64 Merl, Stalins Irrweg. Merl, Stalin: Vor Erfolgen.

concession; his condemning of the hurt of »voluntary joining« was tactical. Already in the fall of 1930, he ordered the restart of collectivization and the liquidation of *kulak* farms, while tolerating the same violence against the peasants. Granting a private plot and a cow, however, became a permanent concession.

It would be wrong to see the private plots primarily as a concession; they became the precondition to stabilize the system of collective farms after the 1932/33 famine. Stalin kept this combination of small-scale and large-scale production until the end of his life. In 1933, he finally understood the importance of private plots: they gave members of collective farms an option to survive by producing some food independently, while the state could dispose of the collective farms' total production without paying for it. This was also the reason why Stalin insisted that private plots be made an obligatory part of the statutes of collective farms in Eastern Europe.

Stalin was traumatized by his failure to foresee the conflict with the peasant women over the cow. On April 3, 1930, in another article published in »Pravda«, Stalin blamed the Party for not giving enough attention to the work with the peasant women. Even at the first union congress of collective farm shock workers, on February 19, 1933, at the peak of the famine, he mentioned that some years before, there had been a »minor misunderstanding« between Soviet power and the peasant women »about the cow«. »Today we solved this problem«, he added, which was followed by applause.[65]

Finalization of the system of collective farms after the 1932/32 famine by a compromise with their members, allowing their survival

Stalin's intervention on March 2, 1930, did not alter his approach to collectivization: arbitrary grain procurement continued, similar to that during War Communism. Taking grain did not care about the collective farms' needs for reproduction. After the end of the enforced procurement, often no grain was left to feed the members, the horses, or to secure the sowing for the next harvest.

In the summer of 1930, it would have been possible to halt the forced collectivization: the good harvest proved that small-scale private farms were still capable of producing, although market relations had been destroyed. The critical loss of animal traction power happened only afterwards, inside the collective farms. With the start of liquidating the most successful farmers, the social costs were already high, and the destruction of the animal stock started. It would have

65 Merl, Stalin: Vor Erfolgen.

been possible to procure grain through compulsory deliveries, but the needs of reproduction would have had to be considered, and incentives would have had to be provided to increase production.

Already in the fall of 1930, Stalin ordered the collectivization to be taken up again. It took place with the same repressions against the peasants. Even the »liquidation of the *kulak* farms« and the deportation of their families were repeated, as they had proved to be the most effective means to push the peasants into the collective farms.[66] Nobody was interested in the question of where these new *kulaks* came from, after their »liquidation as a class« had already taken place at the beginning of 1930. In the following years, the authorities continued to declare further peasants as *kulaks*, aiming to intimidate the other peasants and prevent them from leaving the collective farms.[67]

Grain to feed the members was the most crucial point, as due to severe overpopulation, the collective farms could offer their members seasonal work at best. To survive, however, everyone needed food, regardless of whether their work was necessary for production. The collective farms had a fixed number of workers, whereas state farms hired labor only during the seasonal peaks of work. Already after the 1931 procurement campaign, there was a need to transport some grain as »seed loan« back to the collective farms, otherwise they would not have been able to cultivate their fields.

Stalin's quick policy changes concerning the »voluntary principle« disturbed the peasants and contributed to breaking their resistance. The terror has now reached all farms. Only in the national districts bordering Soviet territory, especially in the Caucasus and Central Asia, armed conflicts against collectivization continued. Most incidents, classified by the secret police as »terror acts,« were rather helpless reactions of those peasants previously hit by expropriation. This does not mean that there was no peasant resistance against collectivization, but rather that it occurred at the beginning of state terror in 1929 and early 1930; afterwards, it became the peasants' fight for their bare survival.

The enormous loss of livestock between 1928 and 1933 best illustrates the extent to which peasant »resistance« and other factors played a role. The killing of livestock can be seen as resistance. Some animals, indeed, were killed by the farmers, but most cows and traction animals perished for other reasons for which only the state was responsible, mainly due to the lack of fodder. The data on the number of livestock during collectivization provides quite reliable information on the reasons why and how the animals perished. The time of their perishing reveals a lot. Those perishing during the early period in 1929 and 1930 were more

66 Merl, *Bauern*.
67 Ibid.

likely to be slaughtered by the peasants in resistance to the threatening expropriation; those perishing between 1931 and 1933 primarily perished due to the lack of fodder. Food was scarce, and millions of people died in the famine.

While they often slaughtered farm animals for meat, the peasants tried to keep cows and traction animals (horses and oxen) as long as possible. Only a few of these were killed by the peasants. Poultry disappeared in the countryside first, most already during the first state attack on the peasants in early 1928. Pigs and cattle (other than cows) were slaughtered with the start of enforced collectivization in 1929 and early 1930. The peasants did not want to give their animals to the collective farms. Until January 1930, the number of pigs had already been cut in half (to 52% of the number from 1928). 35% of the cattle without cows were slaughtered in 1929, and in 1933, only 47% of the stock of 1928 were left. But cows (the milk needed for the kids and thus for the survival of the family) and traction animals (necessary for survival by cultivating the fields) were kept alive as long as possible. The number of cows was only down to 87% in January 1930. Two-thirds of the cows were still alive in early 1933. Only about 10% of the horses perished in 1929/30. However, by early 1933, the number of horses had been cut in half; most had perished within the collective farms between 1930 and 1932 due to a lack of fodder. Enforced collectivization caused chaos; nobody had clear ideas about the organization of work, and the responsibility for feeding the animals was unclear, as fodder and food were in extremely short supply and insufficient for all to survive.[68]

A real rupture in Stalin's agricultural policy happened only when the catastrophe of the 1932/33 famine could no longer be avoided. Now, Stalin sought a compromise with the peasants, opening up a possibility for them to survive while maintaining state control over *kolkhoz* production. Stalin essentially reverted to a tax in kind, in the form of obligatory deliveries, disguised under a symbolic payment far below the costs of production, but accompanied by the guarantee of a private plot.

In the spring of 1932, Stalin was not yet fully aware of the extent of the catastrophe. He was still convinced that it would be possible to procure the required amount of grain, and that it would be sufficient to provide the peasants with more incentives and a guarantee of some payment for their work, thereby fulfilling the high procurement plan. With the decree of May 6, 1932, the local markets were newly legalized, now called »*kolkhoz* markets«. This was combined with pressure: the local markets should be allowed to restart operations from January 15, 1933, only after the regional procurement plan was fulfilled.[69] In July 1932, advance

68 Merl, *Die Anfänge*, 220–29.
69 Merl, Der Holodomor.

distribution in kind was announced, bound to the number of labor units earned, thus establishing the principle of payment by the work done. During threshing, 10–15% of the threshed grain should be distributed according to the number of »labor units« received until that time.[70] Due to the terror under the condition of the famine, both decrees became effective only after the 1933 harvest in 1933/34.

Stalin's first measure in understanding the emergency of a threatening famine was his decree »for the protection of socialist property« from August 7, 1932. It declared the production of collective farms as »socialist property«. Stalin had personally designed this decree to secure the poor harvest primarily for the state. In addition, via »Torgsin« (the state agency for trade with foreign people), the selling of bread and flour in exchange for gold started. In 1932/33, grain against gold was also offered to starving peasants in the countryside.[71] Although Stalin had grasped how serious the situation was, he nonetheless stated in public that only malicious saboteurs starved by hunger, and that this was the proper punishment for them.

The return to tax in kind was decreed in January 1933. For collective and private farms, the obligatory delivery of grain was introduced by hectare norms, starting with the 1933 harvest. Obligatory delivery norms were also imposed on the private plots of collective farm members. They had to deliver half the norms effective for private farmers.[72]

Although Stalin copied Lenin's policy turn of 1921, he did not admit this. He never confessed that forced industrialization with collectivization had caused famine, as this would have put his rule at stake. He denied the famine and blamed it on sabotage. The peak of repression was reached only by his order to introduce internal passports and to arrest peasants trying to flee from the hunger regions.[73] Although speaking of a famine was taboo, Stalin later ordered the blame to be placed on the leading workers of the Ministry of Agriculture »for counterrevolutionary activity« in Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, and Belarus, »organizing famine.« The court was held against them, and many were shot. They were accused of destroying tractors, agricultural machinery, and sowing weeds on the fields.[74] Only in 1988, for the first time, did the »Pravda« admit the existence of famine in 1932/33.[75]

70 Merl, *Die Anfänge*, 327–91. Before, distribution often followed demand (very high, as many members were hardly needed for doing the work). However, more and more frequently, the members got nothing as the state took everything.

71 Osokina, *Stalin's Quest.* Merl, Der Holodomor, 187.

72 Merl, *Bauern*, 129–58.

73 Merl, Der Holodomor, 190–93.

74 Ibid., 192. Cf. *Tragediya*, Vol. 3, 7–48 (Introduction by I. E. Zelenin). Among those shot was Mikhail Volf, the vice minister of state farms.

75 Danilov, Kollektivizatsiya.

The three elements, effective from 1933 onwards, the obligatory deliveries, the guaranteeing of a private plot, and the advanced payment in kind during threshing, may be called »the establishment of the *kolkhoz* system«. They were part of the compromise imposed by Stalin in response to the famine of 1932/33, which ended his previously arbitrary policy. This compromise stabilized the collective farms at least temporarily. In 1935, on Stalin's order, an attempt was started to consolidate the land of the collective farms by giving them state certificates over the land »for eternity«.

The private plots allowed the members to produce some basic food themselves. After discussing the size of the private plots with Stalin at the second conference of collective farm shock workers in January 1935, the size was standardized to 0.5 ha (with regional differences between 0.25 and 1 ha), and the right to a plot was confirmed in the collective farm statute of 1935. Many plots were slightly enlarged. Growing grain was not wanted, but some members used plots to grow corn. With the opening of the *kolkhoz* markets, the members were allowed to sell self-grown products for cash. As they got hardly any money for work from their collective farm, they earned this way the money they needed to pay taxes to the state and to buy other goods.[76] A certain amount of potatoes, meat (independent from keeping animals), and milk, if keeping a cow, had to be delivered to the state. They could keep all additional products for themselves or market them at a competitive price. As the obligatory deliveries made calculable what the members owed to the state, they provided an incentive to increase the production on private plots. The state provided support for purchasing young animals for fattening between 1933 and 1935, to replenish the stock of animals that had been significantly reduced during collectivization. Food production on the plots became essential for feeding the non-agricultural Soviet people with animal products, potatoes, and fruits, which were in extremely short supply in the state trade. Moreover, it provided the members of collective farms with more than half of their income.[77]

While Stalin had ignored the potential of small-scale private production at the end of the 1920s, he now recognized its value and confirmed the right to private plots after the famine. This allowed for the combination of forced labor on the collective farms with private self-exploitation on the private plots. Stalin finally understood that agriculture could not be run solely with violence and terror; the members of collective farms needed a perspective for survival. Although

76 Merl, *Bauern*, 281–94. Only cotton-growing collective farms in Middle Asia since 1935 have paid money to their members, after the state significantly raised the procurement price for cotton. In these regions, however, the members had to buy their food at high prices on the markets – cf. Merl, *Bauern*, 371–90.

77 Ibid., 404–17.

this combination of large-scale and small-scale production was a precondition for his system of collective farms to work, Stalin only tolerated private small-scale production without ending the ideological suspicion against this form. Khrushchev never grasped why Stalin had decided to accept it, and his ideological fight against private plots at the end of 1950 ultimately led to the failure of his agricultural policy.

»Advanced payment« during threshing provided the members of collective farms at least with some grain (and/or potatoes). Often, this was their only reward for work, as at the end of the agricultural year, hardly anything was left over for distribution. The members learned that labor units, until the harvest brought in some grain, were valuable; however, labor units after threshing were just lines on the paper with no value. Taking part in work on the collective farms was thus dramatically reduced after threshing.[78] The term »advanced payment« is misleading, as this was usually the only payment the members got from their collective farms.

As collectivization failed to secure the domestic food supply outside the urban areas, Stalin, at the end of 1933, »granted« a small allotment of land (between 0.125 and 0.25 ha) to everyone living in the countryside, to produce at least some food for themselves. *Kulaks* deported to special settlements got such an allotment as well, but not the forced laborers in the camps. Practically all non-agricultural workers and employees living in the countryside from 1934 onwards were required to produce part of their own food. Many of them also kept some animals. From 1939 onward, they were also required to deliver some potatoes as a form of tax in kind to the state. Only the state and the Party officials, and the intelligentsia, were freed from such obligatory deliveries.[79]

To conceal the failure of collectivization and the ongoing grain shortage in the country, Stalin ordered the falsification of the grain harvest statistics. Instead of the real harvest brought in (barn harvest), from 1933 onward, the data showed »biological« harvest, the grain ripening in the fields. It was about 30% higher than the real barn harvest. These 30%, however, could not be consumed or exported, as they never were brought in from the fields.[80]

Collective farms between the mid-1930s and Stalin's death in March 1953: blocking the options to exit

One of the widespread myths about Stalin's collectivization is »mechanization«. In reality, the level of traction power available in Soviet agriculture in

78 Ibid., 373.
79 Ibid., 320–26. In 1941, they held 4.9 million cattle, of them 3.5 million cows, and 2.7 million pigs.
80 Davies, Harrison, Khlevniuk, and Wheatcroft, *The industrialisation of Soviet Russia* 7, 320–21.

1929 was not restored until the end of the 1930s. While modernization would have required an increase in traction power, the delivery of tractors under Stalin only partly substituted horse traction power. In mid-1929, the total horse traction power was 29.9 or 30.1 million horsepower (23.6 million horses, 6.1 million oxen, and 35,000 tractors). At the end of 1935, there were 12.0 million horses, 2.6 million oxen, and 380,000 tractors (with 6.5 million horsepower). Depending on how mechanical traction power is converted to horse traction power, this was either 60% or, at best, 70% of the traction power of 1929.[81] The supply of tractors was strongly reduced after 1937. At best, by 1940, the traction power of mid-1929 had been restored; more likely, it was around 90%.[82] The significant shortage of traction power was responsible for the extremely low grain yields during the 1930s, which did not surpass or even match the yields achieved by small-scale peasant farms before. Often, the quality of fieldwork was low.[83]

Thus, traction power, despite the delivery of imported tractors, went down significantly at the beginning of the 1930s. Not »peasant resistance«, but the lack of traction power was the main reason for the poor cultivation of the fields. Weeds spread, causing additional problems for harvesting. The import of a large number of tractors in 1930 and 1931 was not planned before. It became necessary as the number of collective and state farms increased significantly, while many horses perished due to a lack of fodder. The import was detrimental to industrialization, as scarce currency had to be allocated for this purpose. Nearly all the currency earned from the export of grain in 1930 and 1931 – during the peak of forced industrialization – was used as an emergency measure to import tractors.[84]

The number of combine harvesters increased since the mid-1930s, but they primarily served to control grain harvesting.[85] In presenting mechanization un-

81 Merl, *Bauern*, 43–45. As the use of tractors is more limited (for example for transports), normally two mechanical traction power are calculated as one horse traction power. In this case, traction power was down to 60% at the end of 1935, if calculating 1 = 1, 70%.

82 Ibid., 44.

83 Merl, Reassessment, 51–53.

84 Merl, *Die Anfänge*, 214. With grain exports in 1930, 701.5 million rubles (147 per ton after 193 rubles in 1929) were earned, and in 1931, 523 million rubles (104 per ton). For the import of tractors and agricultural machinery in 1930, 382 million rubles (1929: 213 million rubles) were spent, and in 1931, 369 million rubles (only tractors: 240 million rubles) were spent. In 1932, the grain export provided 180 million rubles, in 1933, 139 million rubles; in both years, no tractors and agricultural machinery were imported. Justifying Stalin's collectivization with the need to finance industrialization by grain exports, Kondrashin (Kondrashin, *Rossiiskaya derevnya*, 535) ignores that most of the currency earned with grain exports in 1930 and 1931 was spent on the import of tractors and agricultural machinery.

85 Merl, *Bauern*, 45. On January 1, 1933, there were 2,200 combine harvesters; on January 1, 1936, there were 29,336. The mass of combine harvesters was provided only in 1936 and 1937, and by January 1, 1938, their number reached 104,864. After the start of forced collectivization, the focus in 1930 and 1931 had been on importing threshing machines. Their number increased from 2,900 in January 1931 to 27,800 in January 1932, reaching 78,000 in January 1935.

der Stalin as a success, it is often overlooked how heavily agriculture relied on transportation. It was done before by peasant carts and horse-drawn vehicles. The delivered caterpillar tractors were not suitable for transporting, but the number of trucks in agriculture remained nearly zero throughout the 1930s, increasing only from 200 in 1931 to about 75,000 in 1938.[86]

As the state did not pay for the work of the members and the prices for the obligatory deliveries did not cover the other production costs, the collective farms operated at a loss. Therefore, the state had to ensure that they did not engage in any non-agricultural activities. Due to the extreme shortage of services in the countryside, this would have provided the collective farms with comfortable incomes. They would have stopped all loss-bearing agricultural production immediately. Additionally, processing of agricultural products was not allowed to them, as the state financed a significant portion of its budget income through processing.

Soviet industrialization was firmly based on the transfer of capital from agriculture under Stalin. Additionally, in the 1930s, Stalin established a state monopoly on the processing of agricultural products. The state sold the processed products at high prices, including a turnover tax. This generated high profits and became the primary source of income for the state budget. As the tax was included in the state's selling prices, it was kept hidden from the people. Between 1934 and 1938, it made up about two-thirds of the total budget income. After the war, this was still more than half of the total budget income. After Stalin's death, the share of the transfer fell to about 5–10% of the budget.[87]

Under Stalin, the members of collective farms were treated as forced laborers. He deprived them of many civil rights. With the introduction of internal passports at the end of 1932, they lost the freedom of mobility. They needed permission from the local authorities to leave the collective farm for outside work. With the constitution of 1936, Stalin excluded them from the state social security. Their status now was close to serfs: they had to work on the collective farms without receiving real payment, they had no freedom of mobility, and lacked social security.

Towards the end of 1932, collectivization was widely finished in the grain-growing areas. By 1936, hardly any peasants who were still farming for marketing were left. The registered private farms were run mainly by elderly people who produced for their own needs and held only one hectare of land or less.[88]

86 Ibid., 43–45.

87 Merl, Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte, 724–28. In the 1930s, the previous indirect tax on consumption became a »turnover tax« on processed food. State enterprises directly transferred this tax to the state as a »win transfer«.

88 Merl, *Bauern*, 251.

The subsequent significant rupture in Stalin's agricultural policy took place in connection with the bumper harvest of 1937. One should expect that a good harvest would stabilize the collective farms, but it put, on the contrary, their further existence at stake.

In 1937, the members in many grain-growing regions for the first time got a lot of grain during threshing. They won the impression that the worst was over and that they could leave the collective farms, imposed on them against their will, and return to private farming. Several members bought a horse and declared their exit. Disposing of a horse opened a lot of attractive side incomes. Transport and services were in very short supply in the Soviet countryside since collectivization and Stalin's ban against non-agricultural activities of the collective farms. Stalin was concerned that private agriculture could revive in the long run. He ordered restrictions to stop the exit. A special horse tax was introduced for the private keeping of a horse. The tax was so high that it ended the option to earn a living with a private horse.[89]

At the 18th Party congress in 1939, Stalin warned the Party members that the private plots could be used to re-establish private agriculture if the Party did not take special care against their »misuse«. After the congress, restrictive measures were introduced: the »surplus« sizes of the private plots were cut off, and a low minimum number of labor units was made obligatory for each household member. Those who did not provide this minimum number of labor days lost the right to have a private plot.[90]

The introduction of an obligatory minimum of labor days should combat the practice where members preferred to work on their plots to produce products for marketing instead of working on the collective farms. Behind the introduction stood no absolute lack of labor; the required number of labor days was therefore very low (60 to 80, only in regions growing cotton, 100 labor days), as the collective farms were only able to offer seasonal work.[91] The unwillingness of members to perform unpaid work on the collective farms should be addressed. Many members, especially males, needed to look for side jobs. Families with a lot of dependent people (kids, elderly) were in a miserable position in the collective farms. Even hiring workers from neighboring collective farms for money was a widespread practice. The collective farms were not allowed to pay their own members, while they could pay money to hired workers.[92]

89 Ibid., 156–58.

90 Ibid., 295–319. Merl, Reassessment, 59–60.

91 The allowance of non-agricultural side activities would have allowed for better use of the workforce.

92 Merl, *Bauern*, 383. To increase the interest in working on the collective farms, on the initiative of Khrushchev, a decree at the end of 1940 introduced premiums in kind for over–plan production – Merl, *Bauern*, 391–404.

The Party congress did not abolish the right to a private plot, but significantly weakened its legal position. While the state tax had been equal for all plots before, a progressive taxation of incomes from the private plots has now started. The equal tax had been a strong incentive to raise production on the plots by working more intensively with family labor, but it caused social differentiation among the members. The requirement of a minimum number of labor units for every member, especially hit the wives of the stakhanovites. They had not worked on the collective farms before, as their husbands earned a high number of labor units and got special rewards.[93]

A union-wide campaign against the »misuse« of the plots, a general remapping, started in July 1939. Additionally, the land allocated to workers and employees in the countryside was reduced to 0.15 ha, and they were now required to deliver a portion of their production to the state compulsorily.[94] This attack on the private plots caused the slaughtering of private animals and the clearing of fruit trees, and further deteriorated the already unsatisfactory food supply to the Soviet people.[95] In the Western regions near the border with Poland and the Baltic states, the liquidation of the khutors (individual farmsteads) was ordered. Here, the collective farmers still lived in isolation from one another. Together, all these measures were aimed at preparing for war.

After the German attack in 1941, rumors spread that the collective farms would be liquidated after the War. They were not officially denied in order not to threaten the unity of the people against the German aggressors. This underlines the extent to which the collective farms were not stabilized under Stalin. Many members still viewed them as a temporary institution and a hardship.

The victory over Germany strengthened Stalin's dictatorship and the myths of his infallibility. Despite the disaster that collectivization had caused and the miserable situation of the collective farm members, Stalin continued to put them under intense pressure. In the territories that temporarily came under German occupation, a re-collectivization process began, and in 1948, Stalin ordered the start of collectivization in the newly incorporated territories.[96]

High taxes, the repressive use of the »minimum of labor units«, and further restrictions against the private plots made living in the Soviet collective farms even more intolerable and miserable between 1947 and 1953 than during the second half of the 1930s. The distribution of labor days in kind and money was

93 Merl, *Sozialer Aufstieg*, 213–33.

94 Remapping hit especially regions from which migration to industry was strong. In these districts, no longer used plots had been taken over by people remaining in the countryside to produce additional fodder. In total, about 15% of the plot land was cut off: 50% of the land was held by individual peasants, and workers and employees had 30% of the land. Most of this land felt idle.

95 Merl, *Bauern*, 317.

96 Feest, The Collectivization.

lower than in the 1930s.[97] The strongest hit against the members was the 1947 »Currency reform« to devalue the money the peasants had earned and hoarded during the war by selling self-produced agricultural products.

The collective farms suffered from the lack of mechanized traction power and trailed implements. While industrial production in 1950 was already twice as high as it had been before the War, the MTS only restored its prewar level of mechanization in 1950.[98] Losses and falling out of order (also due to the lack of spare parts and competent repair) had been high during the war. In 1950, a significant number of defective machines was listed in the statistics.[99]

As long as Stalin was alive, there were no signs of a change in the agricultural policy. On the initiative of Khrushchev, only the enforced merger of the mostly small and village-bound collective farms started. Their number reduced from about 240,000 to 80,000 in the mid-1950s. This is based on Khrushchev's conviction that larger farms would provide economies of scale. The general assemblies of collective farmers often disagreed with the merger because it meant losing further control to an even more anonymous management.

CONCLUSION

Stalin had no concept of collectivization that he pursued from the beginning. He started from the idea of »modernization« to establish collective farms on large territories based on mechanized traction power. However, for him, the financing of forced industrialization took priority, and he decided to draw the necessary capital from agriculture. In 1929, Stalin shifted the focus of collectivization away from modernization to constructing large-scale mechanized farms and ordered wholesale collectivization based on peasant implements, aiming to squeeze capital out of agriculture by subjugating the peasants. Collectivization for Stalin had become a target on its own. A concession he made in March 1930 to the uprising of the peasant women should have become the precondition for his approach to finally work. He now abandoned the intention to liquidate private agriculture fully and allowed the members of collective farms to retain a private plot, a private cow, and a few other animals. After his policy caused the famine of 1932/33, Stalin established the »*kolkhoz* system«, a compromise with the peasantry, allowing the state to dispose over the production of the collective farms, while opening perspectives for survival for the peasants by prescribing a small, advanced payment in kind during threshing and by allowing to use family labor on the private

97 Bronson and Krueger, The Revolution.
98 Wädekin, *Sozialistische Agrarpolitik*, 87.
99 Merl, Why the Soviet Union, Vol. 5. Merl, Why the Soviet Union, Vol. 6.

plots. With the establishment of the *kolkhoz* system, Stalin, in principle, albeit without explicitly acknowledging it, revised his earlier assertion that small-scale peasant farms were unable to secure forced industrialization. Feeding the people after the 1932/33 famine depended heavily on private, small-scale agricultural production. Mechanization under Stalin primarily served state control over the collective farms and the peasants. He did not trust the peasants, ignored their great capacities for increasing production, and made the members of the collective farms forced laborers with limited civil rights. Stalin never resumed the modernization of agriculture. This would have required him to provide state investments to the collective farms. Although Soviet collectivization yielded inferior economic results, it was promoted to Eastern Europe as a successful model and an effective means of financing industrialization. Following Stalin's death, there was a pressing need to establish a viable model for stabilizing the collective farms.

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