Preface

In the fall of 2023, the Conference on Rural History in Cluj provided the setting for a panel discussion on the modalities of cooperativism as both a concept and a practice in socialist Eastern Europe after the Second World War. This discussion inevitably led to an examination of agricultural policy under socialism, given that the cooperative idea served as a key instrument for communist authorities in transforming the agricultural sector and imposing strict restrictions on private agriculture.

The inherent time constraints of panel discussions left many issues unresolved and arguments insufficiently substantiated. Recognizing this, and with the impressions from the conference still fresh, we decided to embark on a book project. We aimed to offer the authors ample space to support their conference theses with thorough literature and archival research. The book's structure mirrors the panel's organization at the Cluj conference, dividing the content into four chapters, each addressing significant phenomena and dilemmas of agricultural policy in socialist states. These chapters highlight the variations among individual countries, despite their adoption of the Soviet model. We delve into the origins of the Soviet model and its dissemination to other socialist nations, particularly Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia, using Slovenia as a case study.

In the first chapter, Stephan Merl explores the conception and implementation of Soviet agricultural policy under the Stalin regime. He argues that Stalin lacked a consistent collectivization strategy from the outset. Initially, he favored a »modernization« approach, advocating for large-scale collective farms based on mechanized agriculture. However, the prioritization of forced industrialization led him to extract capital from the agricultural sector. In 1929, he mandated complete collectivization to subjugate peasants and secure this capital. After facing resistance, Stalin modified his policy in 1930, allowing collective farm members

to retain private plots and a few animals. Following the devastating famine of 1932/1933, Stalin introduced the »*kolkhoz* system,« a compromise that enabled state control over *kolkhoz* production while offering peasants a semblance of survival through in-kind advances at threshing and the use of family labor on private plots. For Stalin, collectivization became an end in itself, with mechanization serving primarily as a tool for state control rather than agricultural modernization, which would have required state investment.

In his second contribution, Stephan Merl examines the transfer and outcomes of the Soviet model in other European socialist countries. Despite its poor economic results, Soviet collectivization was presented as a successful model for financing industrialization. The need to stabilize collective farms became urgent after Stalin's death. Initial attempts to revise collectivization in countries like Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia were hindered by Khrushchev's insistence on completing collectivization rather than stabilizing existing farms. His eventual removal paved the way for modernizing agriculture by integrating agricultural production with industry. In this endeavor, and in improving the living standards of collective farm members, the Soviet Union lagged behind most Eastern European countries after 1955.

The second chapter, »Divergence,« comprises two contributions focusing on the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian experiences. Zsuzsanna Varga analyzes the long-term shifts in Hungarian agricultural policy and its deviations from the Soviet model. She identifies three distinct collectivization campaigns in Hungary: 1949–1953, 1955–1956, and 1959–1961. Her analysis centers not on the state-peasantry conflict, but on the evolution of the collective farm model in Hungary relative to the Stalinist blueprint. The initial two attempts to rapidly impose the Soviet agricultural system triggered severe production and supply crises, contributing to the 1956 revolution. In its aftermath, the Kádár regime sought to bolster its fragile political legitimacy by promising improved living standards. The food supply became a strategic priority, prompting the government to enact agricultural policy reforms – a move unprecedented in the Eastern Bloc. During and after the final collectivization phase, the agricultural lobby successfully transformed grassroots initiatives concerning work organization, wages, and household management into policies that gradually diverged from the Soviet model. This resulted in the legalization of previously banned or tolerated local initiatives through the 1967 law. The divergence from the *kolkhoz* model took the form of a »collective puzzle,« shaped by pressure from *kolkhoz* members and the mediating role of the agricultural lobby. This divergence facilitated the adoption of Western knowledge and technology, leading to the development of a hybrid Hungarian agricultural model in the 1970s.

In their article, Eduard Kubů and Jan Slavíček examine the post-forced-collectivization period in Czechoslovakia, highlighting the continuity of the authorities' agricultural objectives despite evolving tactics. The regime adopted a more sophisticated approach, employing subtle forms of coercion. From the late 1950s to the late 1980s, the Communist Party's rural policy remained consistent, characterized by increased investment, financial incentives for the cooperative sector (e.g., higher purchase prices), the expansion of cooperative activities beyond agriculture (auxiliary production), workforce skill development, and increased mechanization and chemicalization. Consequently, the rural population's standard of living rose, approaching urban levels in the 1960s and surpassing them by the mid-1970s, a trend that persisted until the regime's collapse. This led to increased construction in rural areas, both public (stores, cultural centers) and private. Rural social stability became a cornerstone of the regime. Notably, agriculture, and specifically agricultural cooperatives, received marginal attention in all four systemic economic reform attempts (1958–1960, 1967–1968, 1978–1980, and post-1988). While the regime failed to address agricultural issues significantly in the first reform, the stability and perceived success of agricultural cooperatives in fulfilling their objectives rendered major reforms unnecessary in subsequent attempts.

The third chapter, titled »Resistance and Dysfunctions,« presents two distinct case studies. Lev Centrih examines the unraveling of collectivization in Slovenia in 1952. He provides a micro-study of this process, using the Ig region near Ljubljana as an example. Despite the establishment of five cooperatives in the war-ravaged area by 1952, all were dissolved by 1953. Centrih argues that while collectivization aimed to consolidate peasant households, it faced significant resistance. Peasants often joined cooperatives primarily to avoid taxes and procurement quotas. The failure was further exacerbated by local officials, partisan veterans, and Party members who frequently prioritized personal interests over policy implementation. This local-level analysis reveals that the failure of collectivization stemmed not only from the divergence between Party goals and peasant expectations but also from internal Party conflicts, particularly among partisan veterans.

While Centrih's contribution highlights the dilemma faced by local party cadres, torn between personal interests and official pressure, Márton László illuminates the active resistance of the rural population to forced collectivization. He provides a detailed analysis of the 1949–1950 collectivization process in the Háromszék administrative district of Transylvania, and the subsequent resistance movements in the summer and autumn of 1950. The organization of *kolkhoz*es

began in 1949, with the first *kolkhoz* inaugurated on August 14. Under pressure to meet targets, mass organization commenced on June 12, 1950, employing coercive tactics, including occasional violence. By July and August, 21 *kolkhoz*es were established, encompassing 2,950 members and significant land holdings. However, tensions escalated, leading to resistance movements from July 24 to late September 1950. Security forces quelled these movements in a coordinated operation across 12 villages on the night of September 22–23, 1950. Peasants labeled as *kulaks* were held responsible for the unrest and, along with their families, were deported to remote regions. Clashes between security forces and locals defending the villagers resulted in casualties, including four locals being fatally shot.

The final chapter explores the introduction of cooperative ownership in Hungary and the role of reformed cooperatives in Slovenia's agricultural advancement during the late socialist period. Dániel Luka analyzes the legislative process from the 1950s to the 1967 Land Act (Law No. 4), which enabled cooperatives to acquire land ownership. Through an examination of primary sources, he elucidates the motivations behind the development, delays, and implementation of this legislation. This legislative »development« was part of a wider cooperative legislation that linked land issues with economic reforms. The regime had to reconcile ideological constraints with political and economic necessities to address the »land question«. The new legislation favored cooperatives and gradually eroded private land ownership, establishing a new form of communal land ownership rather than nationalizing land.

Marta Rendla examines the transformation of agricultural policy in the early 1970s, with a focus on the development of the private agricultural sector and the reform of socialist agricultural cooperatives. She also discusses the revitalization and modernization of the Agricultural Promotion Service, a key factor in agricultural production growth. By the end of the socialist era, Slovenia approached its ambitious food self-sufficiency targets, achieving 85% to 88% self-sufficiency. In 1990, domestic agriculture met approximately 82% of Slovenia's food needs. However, self-sufficiency was uneven, with shortfalls in grains, oils, and sugar, and surpluses in milk, beef, and poultry. Compared to Austria, Slovenia's wheat and maize yields were significantly lower, and milk production per cow lagged behind the European average, despite improvements after 1975. Consequently, the profitability of Slovenian agriculture in 1988 was only about 60% of the national average, and agricultural price ratios were less favorable than the European average.

These chapters highlight the similarities, differences, continuities, and discontinuities within the assumed Soviet agricultural model. They underscore

that agricultural modernization was a shared objective across Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union. Although the political goals were aligned, the paths to modernization varied within the socialist bloc.

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