

Diana Siebert, *Bäuerliche alltagsstrategien in der Belarussischen SSR (1921–1941). Die Zerstörung patriarchalischer Familienwirtschaft*, Stuttgart 1998, Franz Steiner Verlag, 416 pp., annexes, maps, illustrations, indexes. Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des Östlichen Europa, Band 52.

The main thread of Diana Siebert's book is the analysis of the agrarian policy of USSR and BSSR authorities from the end of military operations in Byelorussia after the First World War and Revolution till the German aggression upon the USSR. She emphasizes that the main objectives of this agrarian policy were invariably: a) to ensure the cheapest supply of food to the towns in the USSR, b) to subject the rural population to direct, possibly the widest control. She shows that the actions of the Byelorussian authorities were above all subject to the all-Union decisions. However, especially in the 1920s the republican authorities had a large margin of freedom in the realization of those directives. At least some part of the party and state functionaries made use of those opportunities. A politician who personified such an independent posture is in the author's opinion Zmitrok Prishchepa, in the years 1924–1929 People's Commissar for Byelorussian Agriculture (pp. 343–345).

In the period of NEP Byelorussian agriculture to a large extent continued the developmental lines from before 1914. This period could be acknowledged as advantageous to Byelorussian agriculture. Generally remaining at a low level of development it was modernized through the expansion of the area of land under a three-field system (leaving no fallow ground), gradual improvement of agricultural tools, expansion of the area under crops, improvement of the supplies to the countryside and sale of products through co-operative structures. The pre-war level of production was surpassed relatively quickly, the number of horses — the basic traction force on a farm — increased. Peasant family farms were almost an exclusive form of husbandry.

Collectivization broke with the earlier developmental trends. It is true that at the beginning in many places it was merely formal — a collective farm was officially established, but within it each family farmed in the old way. However,

two years later the authorities adopted a new strategy. The principles of work in a kolkhoz started to be defined in detail, the obligatory organizational structures were specified as well as the strict norms of piece-work; severe punishment was introduced for breaking the discipline of work and for appropriating the kolkhoz possessions and crops; the apparatus of administrative control was developed whose task was to oversee the observance of new principles. These actions invited incredible demoralization, corruption and mess. The real purposes of a farm's existence were overshadowed by the bureaucratic reality. In the 1930s all the statistics show a fall in the area under cultivation, in live-stock and crops per hectare. The demographic dynamics also broke down.

One of the basic purposes of collectivization was to destroy the traditional system of social and economic ties that brought the rural community together. The setting up of a kolkhoz, whose organization, purposes of existence and principles of functioning were imposed from outside and whose management depended more on the higher authorities than on the workers, signified a destruction of the previous structures, hierarchies and the solidarity of the rural community. The liquidation of family farms and adoption of the principle that work is a problem of the individual led to the disintegration of the family as a basic economic structure.

The hopes that the collectivization of agriculture would make possible a rapid modernization of this branch of Byelorussian economy turned out to be unrealistic. The attempts made in the 1930s to introduce through administrative methods the principles of crop rotation, specialization of production (e.g. creation of stock-raising farms), and mechanization of agriculture (the so-called tractorization) ended in a fall not a rise in production. There were many reasons for this. The first was the generally negative attitude of the rural population to the new system. The peasants felt wronged by the loss of their own farms and in face of the new situation they applied a system of permanent passive resistance. No wonder that they were unwilling to introduce the new solutions imposed from above, and did it only under pressure, without exhibiting a minimum of commitment indispensable for the success of the experiment. Quite independently, the general civilization level of farmers and agriculture in Byelorussia was extremely low; in many regions of Polesie not even a three-field, but a two-field farming prevailed. In this situation any endeavours to bring about a rapid modernization of agriculture by administrative means had no chance of success.

The regression of agricultural production connected with quite rapid urbanization of Byelorussia, and at the same time a loss of the possibility to import food from the neighbouring republics (especially the Ukraine) led in the 1930s to the considerable fall in the standard of life and consumption in rural Byelorussia. The author shows that the earnings of kolkhoz members were a small fraction of the income obtained by them in the 1920s from family farms. Moreover the strictly exacted obligations of the kolkhozes towards the state centres of purchase of agricultural products deprived the countryside of a large majority of the food produced. This even led to the creation of local centres of famine. Especially at the time of the great famine in the Ukraine cases of starving to death were observed, especially in the south of Byelorussia. In the author's opinion this may give rise to doubts about the purely politico-administrative causes of the 1932-1933 famine in the Ukraine.

Parallel with the description of the agricultural policy and its results the author, to the extent that her source basis allows, tries to show the reaction of the rural population to the successive actions of the authorities and its ways of getting adjusted to the changing external conditions. The materials she has collected show that this population had actually no chance of effective resistance to the social and economic policy of the state. Following the end of the civil war the state apparatus had at its disposal a wide range of means of pressure, beginning with the army, possibilities of creating the country's legal status, and ending with the current fiscal policy. Therefore the peasants' strategy was

dominated by a tendency to wait, to survive, and finally to get adjusted to the changing conditions. If in the 1920s this strategy did not threaten the basic principles of life of the rural community and the family farm, in the 1930s the departure from the previous systems of values and model of existence became a condition of physical survival. Rural Byelorussia accepted this necessity relatively easily. The acts of positive resistance and rebellion were so few that the authorities did not feel compelled to apply as radical and massive repressions as in the Ukraine.

The authorities won a Pyrrhic victory. The peasants under pressure forsook the old way of social life; however, the authorities could not replace it by a new way, which would be more effective.

The greatest value of the publication under discussion is its firm basis in source material. The author has carried out systematic research into the extant records of Byelorussian republican authorities with a special emphasis on the agricultural sector. She has analysed an enormous literature and socio-political press as well as that devoted to agricultural matters, published in Byelorussia in the inter-war period. She has perused many statistical publications. Worthy of attention is the reliability of her analysis of sources, especially official ones. This reliability is all the more necessary as statistical lists, report materials, party documents and especially records of investigative proceedings arose in a reality and served purposes which contributed to a very falsified picture. It seems that D. Siebert has avoided the danger of yielding to the magic of sources and found in them what they really say about the reality under analysis.

My high opinion of the monograph under review should be supplemented by some critical remarks. It seems that the author does not pay sufficient attention to the specificity of rural economy in Byelorussia. While describing the standard and way of life and work of Byelorussian rural population she uses the data concerning the so-called basic production of a farm (corn and potatoes, milk and meat). On this basis she assesses among other things the level of income and consumption of the peasants as very low, while supplementary occupations and income played an extremely important role in Byelorussian farms. Apart from linen, which the author mentions, an important role was played by gathering and processing forest products (mushrooms, berries, honey, wooden products) and fishing. These were not only the sources of additional income but they also substantially enriched the peasant menu. One may justifiably think that a Byelorussian peasant's menu was much better than that of a basically richer and more civilized Ukrainian peasant. The considerable autarkization and multifunctional character of a Byelorussian farm made it much more resistant to pressure from any authorities than were the more specialized farms and those more dependent on the external world.

The backwardness of Byelorussian agriculture and its small contact with the market had a positive effect on the situation of the Byelorussian countryside in one more respect. The development of the situation in the Byelorussian countryside had practically no influence on the food balance of the whole of the USSR. Thus nobody set before the Byelorussian peasants too ambitious tasks regarding production for other republics. Consequently the local authorities did not have to take such drastic action for obtaining food as in the Ukraine. Even collectivization was not carried out in Byelorussia with such determination as in other regions. Until 1940 over 100 thous. detached farmsteads (as against 800 thous. farms in Byelorussia) remained outside kolkhoz structures. (p. 356)

Another remark has a more detailed character. The author devotes a lot of attention to the analysis of the demographic development of Byelorussia in the first half of the 20th c. Among other things she considers the influence of the events from the years 1914–1921 on the course of demographic processes. From this point of view of basic importance is a possibly precise definition of the changes in the size of population, especially for the years 1914 and 1921–1922. Unfortunately the author, who in general tries to tell us in detail about the sources of

her information and data, in this case provides only figures concerning the years 1897 and 1926. For the year 1914 (p. 85) and 1921 (p. 87) she gives her own estimates, without informing us either of the basis of their construction or of the sources. This calls into question the value of her further conclusions concerning the influence of the world war and revolution on the demographic situation of the country.

In some cases the author makes use of Polish literature on Byelorussian problems, however, she does it inconsistently. For example she has not tracked down the valuable, also from her point of view, works by Krystyna G o m ó ł k a, especially *Między Polską a Rosją* (*Between Poland and Russia*, Warsaw 1994) and *Białorusini w II Rzeczypospolitej* (*Byelorussians in the Second Polish Republic*, Gdańsk 1992) or by Jan J e w a n d o w s k i, especially *Federalizm. Litwa i Białoruś w polityce obozu belwederskiego. 11. 1918 — 4. 1920* (*Federalism. Lithuania and Byelorussia in the Policy of the Belweder Camp, 11. 1918 — 4. 1920*, Warszawa 1962). Perhaps it's due to the lack of closer contact with Polish literature that she presents a schematic, very negative picture of Poland and Polish foreign policy in the first years of the inter-war period in her analysis of the struggle for the future political and systemic shape of Central and Eastern Europe after the First World War (esp. pp. 43–48). The author describes Poles as an absolutely alien power in Byelorussia, deprived of any title to conduct in this area an active politico-military game. Thus she does not take into consideration the several-century long history, the social and national structure of the region and the concrete set-up of political forces.

Regardless of my critical remarks I should emphasize that we have received an extremely valuable book which to a large extent broadens our knowledge of the social, political, economic and cultural reality in Byelorussia in the first half of the twentieth century.

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