

Land Reform after 1945. The Inception of the unsuccessful collectivization in the German Democratic Republic

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Abstract

The study focuses on the issue of the land reform in the Eastern part of Germany, which was occupied by the Soviet army after 1945. The land reform was a key part of future collectivization in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Many causes of the future failure of the collectivization can be found in the events after 1945. After 1945, the areas of East Germany became an area with a number of test runs of the socialist economic experiment. Agriculture was one of the main areas in which the KPD interest group tried to enforce its ideas about collective ownership and thereby gain a dominant position by creating a type of “inclusive” society that excluded big landowners who were the targets of the first stage of the “socialist revolution” in rural areas – the land reform.

Keywords: collectivization; land reform; communism; property-rights; new institutional economics; German Democratic Republic.

Introduction

The study focuses on the issue of the land reform in the Eastern part of Germany, which was occupied by the Soviet army after 1945. The land reform was a key part of future collectivization in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Many causes of the future failure of the collectivization can be found in the events after 1945. The text focuses primarily on the following research question: why did structural changes and reforms after 1945 fail to create an efficient agricultural sector that would be able to problem-free supply urban agglomerations and increase the overall prosperity of the socialist society? Historical literature has up to now not been able to provide a satisfactory answer because the majority of economic historians avoid methodological concepts and still uses the positivist-descriptive approach of presenting historical realities, which is based on certain modifications of the initial professional historiography in the 19th century and is based on believing in objectivity, detailed description, and truthfulness of written sources (Raphael 2003; Soběhart 2009). However, the only result of this approach is a

detailed description of individual economic changes in the context of developing a nation state whose value lies only in gathering different statistical data and “discovering” new sources (Steiner 2013; Ambrosius, Plumpe and Tilly 2006; Soběhart, Kozmanová and Stellner 2013).

Another reason is the uncritical adoption of the neoclassical methodological approach to economy that presents itself as the reason for the victory of “capitalism” and market economy after 1990 (Hesse 2013; Kocka 2010). This approach is also supported by publications that compare the development of agriculture in GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany after 1945, which clearly states that the Western German market approach is more successful (Wehler 2004; Steiner 2004). This makes the fact even less surprising that the economic development of GDR was completely erased from the syntheses of German economic history because according a number of authors it cannot be used in solving current economic issues (Abelshausen 2004; Prolius 2006). The topic of collectivization thereby became a purely “historical topic” that is practically clarified and only missing partial studies that will always only confirm the starting hypothesis about the a priori failure of socialistic economy.

Materials and Methods

The first question that needs to be answered is how did political and economic institutions change in future GDR after 1945? What were the motivations of key interest groups? How did the everyday life in East Germany change under the influence of the “revolution” of formal and informal institutions after 1945? How did the process of collectivization impact the transformation of the agricultural sector in GDR? How effective were the selected measures, reforms, and decisions of main players? Did the institutional “revolution” after 1945 open the way to increasing the quality of life or did it lead to stagnation and poverty of the population?

The term “collectivization” is used only for agricultural changes in the 1950s and later. I, however, think that collectivization cannot be separated from the post-war land reform because the communists mainly created it. The land reform must be understood as a necessary prerequisite for the events in the 1950s. In this context, collectivization is one of the stages of post-war structural changes in agriculture, mostly in the areas of property-rights, the efficiency of the agricultural sector, and the rate of state interventions. The “fiasco of socialistic agriculture” had two main stages (Wehler 2008). The first stage was the previously mentioned land reform in 1945-46 and its impacts in connection with the inception of the GDR; the second stage was the “collectivization” between 1952-1961.

The land reform was one of the main topics that were discussed between German communist politicians in Moscow exile. Influenced by their Moscow comrades, the majority was inspired by the Soviet Union in the 1930s that was characterized by forced collectivization, expropriation, the fight against large landowners (kulaks), and reallocation of land ownership to landless people, small agricultural homesteads, and agricultural workers. These population groups were pragmatically supposed to support

communists in freed Germany. Until the end of the war, there was however no specific plan how the land reform should look like, when it should happen, or what priorities should be followed in the first post-war months (Schöne 2011).

The post-war situation in Germany was on first glance not ideal for any severe changes because rural areas were not adapting to the consequences of war – destroyed harvest, significant decline in cattle, destroyed farms and agricultural buildings, the lack of labor force, and damaged fertile soil (Steiner 2004; Buchheim 1999; Patel 2012). The first measures of the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (SVAG) also had negative influence. SVAG was the main administration and political authority in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SBZ). The areas of Soviet administration were further subordinate to land and province administrations that were lead by high-ranking officers of the Soviet military. These immediately ordered to require food, agricultural plants, agricultural machines, and to occupy the most preserved homesteads and agricultural buildings to serve as regional centers of Soviet self-rule. The interventions of the Soviet Occupation Zone in agriculture have to be evaluated in the context of the overall concept of Soviet approach to post-war Germany. According to the Soviet vision, Germany was primarily an area, which was to become a supplier of capital, technological, technical, and infrastructural help for restoring Soviet economy. Prosperity and the increase of the quality of life of German citizens were, therefore, never the first priority. What the Soviets were trying to achieve was the direct opposite: ruthless “robbing” of economic potential of the Soviet Zone (Bauerkämper 1999; Wolfrum 2008). That is why the SBZ had to face high reparations that were multiple times higher than reparations in the Western zones, dismantling of entire industrial zones, creating inter-German trade barriers, paralyzing the transportation infrastructure, outflow of capital to USSR, and confiscations by the Soviet military in rural areas. In this context, it is necessary to stress that the area of future East Germany was not “doomed” to lower quality of life from the start. It was rather the other way around. Central and Eastern German areas that were under the influence of SVAG after World War II were supported by a number of big enterprises of the chemical industry, high-quality light industry, highly developed heavy manufacturing, and primarily soft material mechanics enterprises that were some of the best in the world. Compared to other countries, even agriculture was much more effective and had a lot of experience with market agriculture, which further stresses the importance of institutions for agricultural growth of concrete regions (Judt 1995).

Regardless of the previously mentioned reasons and starting in the summer 1945, Soviet representatives, not only SVAG, but also primarily the political leadership in Moscow pushed the SBZ politicians to quickly introduce the land reform because it would win the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) loyal voter groups that would help establishing communists throughout the political spectrum (Bauerkämper 1999; Laufer 1996). The first Soviet proposal soon emerged demanding not only the punishment of main Nazi criminals and supporters of the NSDAP by expropriation and land confiscation, but primarily by collective expropriation of large farms with lands bigger than 100ha (Laufer 1996b). A very similar text emerges in the first official proclamation of KPD about the land

reform in June 1945 that also predetermined the language institutional platform in which the topic of land reform will be featured. Confiscation of all assets was planned primarily for all war criminals and Nazi bosses; it also planned to: "...Liquidierung des Großgrundbesitz, der großen Güter der Junker, Grafen und Fürsten und Übergabe ihres ganzen Grund und Bodens sowie des lebenden und toten Inventars an die Provinzial- bzw. Landesverwaltung zur Zuteilung an die durch den Krieg ruinierten und besitzlos gewordenen Bauern" (Weber 1987, p. 36).

The steps taken in August 1945 are very important. They ultimately defined the execution of the land reform in the Soviet Occupation Zone. Implementing the land reform had a crucial influence on the context of new interpretation of German history that soon became one of the key legitimization pillars of KPD ("Geschichtspolitik"). The land reform represented the compensation of the historical injustice towards the German farmer population that had been continuing since the German Peasants' War in the 16th century that created the main conflict between feudal landowners and right-less people without land, serfs, and subjects.

Not even these "rhetorical exercises" managed to hide a number of key factors. The first one was the use of "collective" guilt of all landowners of agricultural land bigger than 100ha. In times of functioning democracy, only an independent court can decide about the guilt or innocence of someone. Collective guilt is basically only "revenge" of the majority on a concrete "excluded" group regardless of its level of guilt. In the case of war criminals and top representatives of the NSDAP, the loss of property is justified unlike in the case of big landowners primarily when we realize that these steps had no lawful or legal basis but were populist declarations of the members of the communistic party (Rick 2016). The principle of collective guilt is also one of the main institutional failures because it destabilizes not only economic but political and social structures as well that experience a fundamental shock, which then reflects in their economic efficiency, political engagement, and social mobility. It also creates all kinds of human hate, revenge, and bad will against the groups that suddenly lost "institutional" protection.

Another characteristic connected to the land reform is "evoking" the notion of crisis and decline that can only be countered with higher activity of communistic institutions. Not only in the case of the land reform, it was not a "bottom-up" reform but rather a Soviet "top-down" order that was soon adopted by the KPD (Bauerkämper 1995; Schier 2001). Agriculture was facing a number of problems that were mostly in connection with the end of the war and SVAG activities in the Soviet Occupation Zone. The implementation of the land reform was also not widely publically supported but mainly accompanied by Soviet troops. The population was mainly passive and awaited what the high-praised reform of property-rights would bring (Schöne 2011; Rick 2016).

The implementation of a land fund was an institutional "innovation" that in its first stage gathered all the expropriated or confiscated land and land committees then decided who would be assigned with this land (Bauerkämper 1995; Schöne 2011; Rick 2016). It could seem at first glance that the land fund and land committees were only responsible for the

transfer of land from old owners to new ones without disturbing the institution of private ownership but the reality was completely different. The land fund primarily clearly stated that the owners of the land will not decide about the transfer of the lands while respecting market mechanisms but the state who defined its own rules about who will loose and who will get the land.

The following table shows how the influence of the land fund and land committees grew directly proportionally to the confiscated area in individual areas of SBZ:

Table 1: Expropriated or confiscated land by the land fund (total area in ha)

Original condition	SBZ (overall)	Mecklenburg	Brandenburg	Saxony-Anhalt	Saxony	Thuringia
Private property	2 649 099	861 571	739 383	572 702	302 220	173 223
State property	337 507	133 489	86 255	77 117	13 277	27 369
Settling companies/ Nazi institutes	22 764	4 991	10 617	4 963	1 636	557
State and private forests	200 247	50 139	77 309	52 026	14 121	6 632
Other property rights	88 465	23 388	34 265	12 949	17 554	309
Overall	3 298 082	1 073 578	947 829	719 777	348 808	208 090

Source: Results of the land reform, September 1945. In JUDT, Matthias (ed). DDR – Geschichte in Dokumenten. Beschlüsse, Berichte, interne Materialien und Alltagszeugnisse, Dok. 2, Bonn : Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, p. 103.

In addition, the institute of private property-right was not maintained on several levels. The new owners did not become independent and fully-fledged landowners because they did not have the right to further sell, rent, or change the land. Private ownership of agricultural land was maintained, unlike the one of agricultural technology and machines. Under the pretense of the lack of such machines, all of them were transferred into the property of central organs, the so-called machine and tractor stations (MTS) that independently on the interests of the farmers decided about who will be lend a tractor, combine harvester, or sowing machine (Bauerkämper 1999). In this context, we speak about the implementation of a certain mix of property-rights where the private property-rights were modified and the “central” state property-rights were increasingly more enforced.

The land reform caused not only economic changes but a “social revolution” as well because it fundamentally restructured the traditional social structure of rural areas. In a short time, the state institutions abolished the privileged status of big landowners and

traditional agricultural families that often formed a type of “rural nobility” starting in the 19th century. The landowner of land bigger than 100ha were the most effected by this social discrimination as the table shows.

Table 2: The share of big land (in ha) in the overall area of agricultural land 1939 and 1946

Land	Year	Less than 1ha	1-5ha	5-10ha	10-20ha	20-50ha	50-100ha	100-200ha	More than 200ha
Brandenburg	1939	1,9	7,0	9,2	17,3	22,3	9,2	7,7	25,4
	1946	3,2	8,8	22,4	20,5	22,8	8,3	3,8	10,1
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	1939	1,2	3,5	4,2	13,5	18,3	9,0	6,7	43,6
	1946	1,4	5,4	31,9	21,2	20,6	8,0	2,4	9,2
Saxony-Anhalt	1939	1,9	6,6	9,0	18,1	24,8	11,7	7,9	20,0
	1946	11,3	6,5	20,3	21,2	22,9	9,8	1,8	6,3
Thuringia	1939	4,4	19,1	19,4	26,0	16,2	6,1	5,2	3,7
	1946	12,0	16,7	21,7	27,4	15,7	4,1	1,4	1,0
Saxony	1939	3,8	12,5	15,2	26,9	19,1	8,8	7,2	6,5
	1946	3,0	14,4	23,5	28,1	22,3	6,7	0,9	1,1
SBZ in total	1939	2,4	8,7	10,4	19,4	20,6	9,2	7,1	22,3
	1946	5,9	9,4	24,1	22,9	21,3	7,8	2,2	6,3

Source: The share of big land (in ha) in the overall area of agricultural land 1939 and 1946. In. JUDT 1998, p. 110.

The biggest growth was in landowners between 5-10ha and 10-20ha who were to become the main support of KPD in rural areas.

The following Table 3 shows how new societal groups supported communists and which were the “inclusive” groups of socialistic society.

Tab. 3: Reallocation of land to new private owners (in brackets: number of new owners)

Land reallocation	SBZ (in total)	Mecklenburg	Brandenburg	Saxony-Anhalt	Saxony	Thuringia
People without land and agricultural workers	932 487 (119 121)	365 352 (38 286)	220 276 (27 665)	218 209 (33 383)	87 289 (13 742)	41 361 (6 045)
Small farmers	274 848 (82 483)	41 316 (10 867)	77 582 (20 821)	71 865 (20 359)	50 865 (17 553)	33 190 (12 883)
Displaced persons	763 596 (91 155)	365 943 (38 892)	208 812 (24 978)	114 227 (16 897)	51 573 (7 492)	23 041 (2 896)
Small renters	41 661 (43 231)	6 561 (3 428)	9 603 (7 004)	12 129 (12 057)	5 062 (6 516)	8 296 (14 226)
Persons working in other sectors	114 665 (183 261)	19 437 (9 842)	28 409 (27 251)	33 116 (63 319)	21 142 (55 772)	12 561 (27 077)
Increase of forest area of current owners	62 742 (39 838)	16 814 (13 204)	19 254 (8 379)	9 731 (6 374)	8 168 (5 091)	8 775 (6 590)
In total	2 189 999 (559 089)	815 423 (114 519)	563 936 (116 298)	459 287 (152 389)	224 129 (106 166)	127 224 (69 717)

Source: Reallocation of land to new private owners. In JUDT 1998, p. 104.

The land reform soon discovered a number of other significant problems that clearly showed the limits of this “socialistic revolution” in rural areas. Despite always repeating declarations that the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) that was created by uniting the remaining allowed political groups in the area of the Soviet Occupation Zone was able to change the conservative rural area so incredibly, the everyday life was completely different than the communist high officials imagined mostly due to the fact that not even the communists had a clear idea of how the “right” situation in East German rural areas was supposed to look like.

The biggest issue was the lack of agricultural infrastructure and technological equipment to increase the efficiency and productivity of agricultural soil cultivation (Steiner 2004; Wehler 2004). Complete lack of heavy mechanization and beef and pork livestock caused that rural areas often returned to the past and had to employ hard manual labor. The so-called Neubauern (“new farmers”) faced the worst challenges (Hyeong-Soo 2012; Boldorf 2009) because they often did not have any experience with agriculture and thus became more often dependent on traditional farmer families who had the sufficient mechanization and livestock. This also showed another limit of the centralized planned economy because despite all of the promises from centralized institutions, including the machine and tractor stations, they were not able to secure enough machines for “favored” groups of new farmers (Bauerkämper 1999). Apart from the “new farmers,” displaced Germans from Poland and Czechoslovakia had the worst situation. They were also

supposed to be one of the privileged social groups. They arrived when the majority of the agricultural land was divided and they were also facing a negative and hostile attitude, not only from traditional village groups but also from the ones who arrived before them and now feared that they could lose their newly gained land, livestock, and agricultural buildings (Bauerkämper 1994).

Results

The results of the land reform were very unflattering. Soon, it was obvious that SED did not have a clear idea how to increase efficiency and productivity of agriculture because the preferred awarding of agricultural areas between 5-10ha did not lead to independence and prosperity of new agricultural homesteads but the other way around, to a drop of hectare profits, decrease of livestock, and dependence on the decisions of state agricultural institutions regarding assigning heavy machinery or promises of building new agricultural buildings. It was, therefore, not possible to fulfill the hectare profits defined by the central plans and even entire cities were soon endangered because they faced a lack of agricultural products (Scherstjanoi 1995). The situation in rural areas escalated at the turn of the 1940s and 50s and led to more and more former big landowners fleeing to the Federal Republic of Germany. New landowners also soon started to massively leave agricultural homesteads and move to urban areas because they hoped that they could find better and more lucrative employment in industrial branches (Bauerkämper 1999; Schöne 2005).

Conclusion

After 1945, the areas of East Germany became an area with a number of test runs of the socialist economic experiment. Agriculture was one of the main areas in which the KPD interest group tried to enforce its ideas about collective ownership and thereby gain a dominant position by creating a type of “inclusive” society that excluded big landowners who were the targets of the first stage of the “socialist revolution” in rural areas – the land reform. SED bet all on the political level of agricultural issue disregarding basic economic approaches; any kind of resistance was harshly punished.

The example of the land reform can also serve as a kind of case study of nonfunctional institutions in the context of centralized planned economy and offers several general conclusions. First, the issue of asymmetrical information in which the key information are not known to the individual members of the exchange but only to the state who misuses them to strengthen the position of a concrete interest group – the SED. Already after 1945, a type of “predatory state” became dominant in East Germany that took advantage of at that point functioning institutions and groups of society.

The process of land reform and subsequent collectivization also showed how important private ownership is for economic growth of each society. One of the adverse heritages of the communist era is the doubting of private ownership and belief in collective ownership. Not only the public choice theory but also getting to know the historical reality clearly

show that collective ownership causes poverty, inefficiency, a high loss rate, and immense transaction costs that apply to everyone who is not making the decisions.

The changes in agriculture in both parts of Germany also verify another premise of institutional economy, namely that no group of society is destined for poverty. The quality of life is always dependent on the decisions of concrete political representation. Wealth or poverty are thereby caused by concrete politicians and not the amount of raw materials, sufficient amount of agricultural soil, or good infrastructure. Communist economy offers a number of these bad economic and political decisions. On the other hand, the development after 1990 clearly showed that even bad economic decisions could be changed and adapted so that they lead to prosperity.

The last conclusion is aimed at the impossible perfect planning and control. The more advanced, complex, and interconnected the system is, the harder it is to manage, control, and command it. That is why I urge to critically assess the previous conclusions about communist economies because even the name centralized planned economy evokes something perfect and efficient (Wehler 2008). Yet the historical reality was the complete opposite. The more the regime enforced its will and reacted violently, the more grew the dissatisfaction of the population and its manifestation in public. That is why it is necessary to assess communist economies as a concourse of many immediate and ad-hoc decisions that did not correspond to a stable and thought-out plan.

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