MERL, STEPHAN. Bauern unter Stalin. Die Formierung des sowjetischen Kolchossystems, 1930–1941. [Osteuropastudien der Hochschulen des Landes Hessen, Reihe I: Giessener Abhandlungen zur Agrar- und Wirtschaftsforschung des europäischen Ostens, Band 175.] Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1990. 512 pp. DM 52.00.
—,—. Sozialer Aufstieg im sowjetischen Kolchossystem der 30er Jahre? Über das Schicksal der bäuerlichen Parteimitglieder, Dorfsowjetvorsitzenden, Postinhaber in Kolchosen, Mechanisatoren und Stachanowleute. [Osteuropastudien der Hochschulen des Landes Hessen, Reihe I: Giessener Abhandlungen zur Agrar- und Wirtschaftsforschung des europäischen Ostens, Band 173.] Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1990. 276 pp. DM 42.00.

While Soviet historians studying pre-war collectivization (1929–1941) have always divided their attention equally across the whole period, Western authors have tended to concentrate on the early phase, from 1929 to 1932/1933. Understandably so, given that the terrifying dekulakization and the great famine which costed millions of lives occurred at this time. In the last four or five years Russian publications have also focused on this early phase. Against this background Merl's *Bauern unter Stalin*, which looks at the whole period from 1929 to 1941, raises expectations, not least because Merl has published a number of studies since 1981 on Soviet agriculture in the inter-war period.

It is not Merl's intention to provide a balanced synthesis of pre-war collectivization in this substantial monograph, although the title certainly suggests as much. His approach is much more specific and focuses on three questions which are central to the concept of collectivization, namely: (i) what coercive measures did the authorities apply and were they effective?; (ii) how did the family-based small-scale farm (both within and outside the *kolkhoz* structure) fare?; and (iii) were the authorities able to involve the *kolkhozniki* in *kolkhoz* production by means of material incentives?

This directed approach, based on Merl's remarkably broad knowledge of the sources available to him, has resulted in a very informative analysis of these three problem areas. The section on coercive measures, for instance, contains, in addition to a thorough but brief survey of dekulakization, a wholly new survey of the "voluntary" and obligatory taxes, deliveries in kind, compulsory state loans and so on, with which the authorities on the one hand tied the *kolkhoz* peasant more closely to the *kolkhoz* and on the other forced the remaining individual peasants into the *kolkhoz* by imposing additional burdens, particularly between 1934 and 1936. New is also the description in this section of the ruthless way in which the authorities forced the demolition of the homesteads of the 800,000 *khutor kolkhoz* peasants outside the villages of western Russia in particular, while not exactly making haste with the construction of new homes, usually in a neighbouring village, but in some cases in Siberia.

The second section deals first with the mini-farm of the remaining individual peasants operating outside the *kolkhoz* structure and then the private plots of the *kolkhozniki*. With a torrent of figures on the available land per farm, the amount of livestock and the shares of production allocated to obligatory deliveries, personal consumption and the free market – figures covering in part

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several years and in part the whole decade – Merl demonstrates the inevitable demise of individual peasants. Against this the yields of the *kolkhozniki*'s private plots rose slightly between 1933 and 1938. The subsequent primarily ideologically motivated party offensive against this "social relic" reversed this development and during the years 1939–1941 a fall in the number of livestock kept by the *kolkhozniki* occurred, albeit a less dramatic one than during the first years of collectivization.

The third section deals with income distribution within the *kolkhoz*. The discussion culminates in a detailed comparison between the peasant's basic income in the *kolkhoz* and the additional income from the private plot, wage labour outside the *kolkhoz* and so on. This comparison shows not only that by 1940 around three-fifths of a peasant's income derived from non-*kolkhoz* activities, but also that *kolkhoz* incomes differed markedly from region to region, while incomes from additional activities were broadly the same across the whole country. This meant that the *kolkhoz* structure, in essence intended to reduce income differentials within the peasantry, actually contributed to their widening.

Merl's factual description of the three above-mentioned problem areas is embedded in a wide-ranging interpretation of the collectivization as putative social and economic modernization. For a long time the dominant view among historians was that the comprehensive collectivization was coupled from the beginning (late 1929) with a capital transfer from agriculture to industry, and that again from the beginning this was part of a deliberate strategy. Since the publication in 1969 of a study by the Soviet economist A. Barsov on this transfer and the debates it generated, it has become generally although not universally accepted that the capital transfer from agriculture to industry did not rise during the First Five Year Plan (1928–1932) but actually fell sharply. Merl, who fully shares this view, goes a step further and postulates that from 1929 to 1932 there was in fact no clear transfer strategy and that in another administrative guise a policy of intensified requisition (the so-called "Siberian" method) was pursued. The real development of the *kolkhoz* system occurred after the catastrophic dekulakization, the great famine and the concomitant general crisis of 1932/1933, and should be seen as a reaction to these. The introduction of fixed, announced and hence calculable deliveries imposed on the *kolkhoz* as a whole and the individual *kolkhozniki* (and individual peasants), replacing the arbitrary requisitions of the past, laid the foundation for a resumption of the capital transfer from agriculture to industry. But the effects of the destruction of agricultural productive capacity in the period before 1933 continued to be felt, and the ridiculously low state purchasing prices for agricultural products provided no incentive for efficient action. The system was at best able to secure the pre-collectivization level of production per head; it was not able to raise production significantly.

Crucial to an assessment of Merl's in-depth study is of course the question whether the source material available to him provides a sufficient basis for his far-reaching analyses. Like many other Western sovietologists, Merl had no access to the Russian archives, with the exception of the Smolensk party archive which has found its way to Harvard, and had to rely on published material (press reports, proceedings of political meetings, statistical data). But that such a handicap need not necessarily preclude fundamental socio-historical research

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has been shown convincingly with regard to agriculture by Naum Jasny's now classic study *The Socialized Agriculture of the USSR. Plans and Performance* published in 1949. Of course every piece of research presents different opportunities and problems. Merl indicates clearly that his description of the individual peasant and *khutor* peasant is based primarily on the Smolensk archive and that the scope for generalizing from these data is "limited" (p. 199). On the other hand he is able to exploit the published sources like no other, and at times his study achieves a precision which leaves many archive studies standing. A revealing example in this context is the recent study of the plots and mini-farms of the *kolkhoz* and individual peasants in the Urals by the Russian historian M. Denisovich. Although he had access to all the relevant archives, his description of the farms is summary and written from an "outside" perspective. Concerning the setting of the minimum/maximum size of the *kolkhoznik*'s private plot in 1935 (25/50 ares), he is able to report no more than that subsequently all private plots were expanded to 25/50 ares.[1] Merl, on the other hand, has five pages of detailed information on how this decision panned out in the different regions. He describes the reduction of sizes in irrigated ares or in locations where the proximity of a market could give the *kolkhoznik* the wrong ideas, intervention from Moscow in cases where the *kolkhoz* reduced the plots on the basis of "custom", and some cases of allocations above 50 ares and their leasing to individual peasants. And there is also a table showing average plot sizes by year from 1930 to 1940 as well as the amount of land used for cultivating potatoes, vegetables and cereals (pp. 281–285 and table 45).

The statistical source material from Soviet publications on which Merl draws presents a separate problem. Doubts about the reliability of the published figures are certainly justified, especially for publications after the years 1932/1933. Merl points out that the same social phenomena are often discussed in several publications and that by comparing them systematically "trend distortions" can be identified (p. 31). This seems a sound enough starting-point, but it does not always hold true. Thus the statistical consumption of basic foods by the village population was clearly higher than the available stocks as indicated by the statistics. Merl says he has no explanation for this discrepancy (p. 417, tables 72 and 73). On the other hand the statistics on the *kulak* families exiled as *spetsposelentsy* assembled by Merl from various secondary Soviet sources meshes well with an NKVD report from 1932 published recently.[2]

This reviewer does have some problems with the organization of the exposition. The three central questions are dealt with in strict chronological order from 1929 to 1941, and aspects within them (concerning the *khutor* peasant, the state loans, etc.) are discussed in the same way. There are actually nine such expositions, all running from 1929 to 1941. The sparing use of

[1] M.N. Denisovich, *Lichnye krest'ianskie khoziaistva na Urale (1930–1985 gg.)* (Yekaterinburg, 1991), p. 64.

[2] Published by V.N. Zemskov in "Spetsposelentsy", in *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, 1990, no. 11 (November). Merl's survey covers the period to September 1931 and counts 346,000 families, while the NKVD survey runs to the end of 1931 and counts 388,334 families.

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cross-references does not help in this arrangement; the reader is in danger of losing track. Even so, this book is mandatory reading.

In his study of social upward mobility (*vydvizhenie*) within the *kolkhoz* Merl once again moves on to virgin soil. The analysis is considerably more sketchy, since there are few relevant sources available. There are no overall data on upward mobility in agriculture, and descriptions of individual careers that are available, such as those of stakhanovites, are based on stereotypes and thus unusable. It was necessary to look to less obvious sources, such as reports in the Soviet press on prosecutions of *kolkhoz* chairs (relevant for their class consumption and job turnover), reports on "violations of *kolkhoz* democracy", interviews with political emigrés (the Harvard project) and others. Once again the Smolensk archive proved a rewarding source of information for one who knows what questions to ask.

In chapter 1 Merl investigates upward mobility via membership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (KPSS). He relies on two characteristics which were included in the membership lists published at regular intervals at the time. The first characteristic was "class composition" (*sotsial'noe polozhenie*), the occupation of the prospective party member before joining the party; in practice the party statistics worked with only three categories, "worker", "peasant" and "white-collar worker". The second characteristic was "current occupation" (*rod zaniatii*), the occupation of the party member at the time of the party census. Merl reasons that because the first characteristic was by definition unchangeable for every individual party member and the second could change depending on an individual's social career, the difference in annual totals between peasants in terms of class consumption and peasants in terms of current occupation would yield the number of peasant party members who moved up the social ladder, albeit, he admits, "in broad outline" (p. 27). According to his calculations upward mobility among peasant party members occurred above all in 1931 and 1932, around 100,000 people in each year. In the other years *vydvizhenie* affected only several thousands per year.

But Merl's calculations are decidedly more rough-and-ready than he cares to admit. Of course there is a basic relationship between figures on class composition and current occupation. But in my view establishing the exact link is complicated by, firstly, the very broad categories into which the party membership is divided, with all kinds of intermediate groups allocated to "workers", "peasants" or "white-collar workers"; and, secondly, the special historical situation of the First Five Year Plan (1928–1932), with its massive changes in the occupational structure of the labour force. Concretely this means that the key factor distorting Merl's model – former peasants who at the time of admission to the party had already worked their way up to worker or white-collar worker – was so significant during the First Five Year Plan that it completely obscures the functioning of the relationship which he seeks to establish. Mathematically speaking Merl's model is not watertight either. He does not sufficiently keep apart the gross membership increase figures (= initial notification of new candidate members, usually published quarterly) and net increase figures (= gross increase minus the total number of members expelled, leaving voluntarily or administratively lost, published as of 1 January) (pp. 29ff. and table 3, column 5). The discrepancies are far from negligible. The gross

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increase for peasants in terms of current occupation in 1931 is 306,393, the net increase 198,748, leaving a difference of 107,645.[3] After Merl believes to have identified the *vydvizhenie* for 1931 by his usual subtraction, he carries out a control calculation in which he substracts the net annual figure for membership increase in the rural party cells from the gross increase for peasants. The difference, around 100,000, is in his view the *vydvizhenie*, in effect broadly speaking the above-mentioned statistical total of 107,645.[4]

Merl is on firmer ground in the study's three other chapters, which address developments within the *kolkhoz*. Here too data on upward mobility are only fragmentary because of the lack of source material, but as an analysis of the social stratification of the *kolkhoz* structure Merl's monograph offers much new material. The most revealing is perhaps the description of the function of the *kolkhoz* chair, which includes a detailed survey of the staggeringly rapid turnover in this post. The examination of the position of the tractor drivers takes us further than the subsequent contributions by M. Oja.[5] The astute analysis of the role of women in the *kolkhoz* and private plot is gender history of the best kind.

Merl's overall conclusion is that the world of the *kolkhoz* was not an ideal breeding ground for social upward mobility, certainly not after the rupture of 1932/1933. Within the *kolkhoz* the differential in living standards between *kolkhoznik* and official was too small to provide a strong incentive for seeking promotion. For the highest-ranking officials, in particular the *kolkhoz* chairs, there was little scope for promotion outside because of the party's deep-rooted suspicion of all things to do with the *kolkhoz*. Only stakhanovites were able to pull themselves out of the *kolkhoz* context, temporarily at least. They did so through tremendous physical efforts, which they were only able to maintain for a few years; afterwards they would fall back to their previous positions.

*Leo van Rossum*

[3] The party publication *Partiinoe stroitel'stvo* is the best source of party statistics, but the background information it provided on the figures was generally very sketchy. The most detailed analysis of gross and net figures is contained in V.V., "Kolichestvennyi i kachestvennyi sostav partii", in *Partiinoe stroitel'stvo* 1932, no. 9, pp. 48–51. (Merl does not refer to this article.) V.V. puts the gross increase for 1931 at 997,000, the net increase at 821,000, a difference of 171,000. This figure includes 50,000 members expelled, 13,000 who left voluntarily, 13,000 who died, and 90,000(!) who left for an unknown destination.

[4] It is worth mentioning that Daniel Thorniley, in his *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Rural Communist Party, 1927–39* (London, 1989), based on virtually the same material but not referred to by Merl, says that it is not possible to quantify the *vydvizhenie* of peasant party members around 1930 (p. 41).

[5] Matt F. Oja, "*Traktorizatsiia* as Cultural Conflict, 1929–1933", in *The Russian Review*, vol. 51 (1992), pp. 343–362; and Matt F. Oja, "K voprosu o kadrakh mekhanizatorov v sovetskom sel'skom khoziaistve (1929–1933 gg.)", in *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, 1993, no. 2, pp. 176–183. Oja makes no reference to Merl.

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