was strictly a reaction against a German-Soviet trade treaty signed earlier in the month.

Kettle has produced a book of significant scholarly merit. As he continues researching and writing his project, he ought to concentrate on balancing analysis and interpretation with factual narration. Too often in this volume on searches in vain for critical evaluations of events and issues.

Timothy E. O'Connor
University of Northern Iowa


In the past ten years, much ink has been expended discussing the civil war era as a formative experience for the Soviet Union and the Communist Party. Orlando Figes's work adds to this discussion, focusing on an investigation of the peasantry of the central black-earth region in the civil war.

Figes's monograph asks a number of important questions about a society where 80 percent of the population in 1914 were registered as peasants, and deurbanization during the civil war made the relationship between state and peasant yet more fundamental to the stability and development of the country. Figes's basic argument is that by the end of the civil war, two societies coexisted, rather uneasily, within the new “Soviet” society, each more or less autonomous. The urban society was Communist-dominated and backed by the power of the state. Figes does not treat this society in any detail. His interest lies in an examination of peasant society, a society not backed by the coercive power of the state and not organized for easy mobilization, but armed with the weapons of passive (and sometimes violent) resistance—food production and overwhelming numbers. A good portion of his book attempts to explain how the smaller society managed not only to dominate the larger peasant society, but also to acquire peasant support in defeating other contenders for state power, some of whom are often seen in the West as more peasant-oriented.

The book provides a convincing portrait of the Bolshevik coming to power in the countryside, presenting peasant support for the Party as a rational choice in the circumstances. It concludes with a discussion of the widespread peasant revolts against Soviet power. These revolts have often been portrayed in Western literature as ill-timed, as having missed connecting with their “natural allies” (certain of the Whites) by a cruel irony of history. Figes argues that throughout the civil war years, the peasantry attempted to create an autonomous, or nearly autonomous, peasant-dominated society, and that the Whites were perceived as a more serious threat than the Communists; their revolt against Communist power was delayed until it was clear that the greater threat, the landlords (i.e., the Whites), had been defeated.

At the heart of this book are the two chapters on rural politics and the rural economy in the civil war. First, Figes provides a cogent, methodical exploration of peasant support for the Bolsheviks, identifying the social
groups most likely to be Bolshevik supporters (radicalized veterans, primarily). He demonstrated the methods whereby, in the 1919 Soviet elections, the Bolshevik Party managed to achieve dominance of volost executive committees (VIKs) even though the village soviets from which these members were elected had very small Bolshevik minorities. Admitting the role of “appointmentism” and its increasing influence, Figes also shows other factors that played a part in encouraging Bolshevik dominance from the first. In his chapter on the rural economy, Figes emphasizes the changes that occurred in the development of the food requisitioning campaigns, and provides more detail than has hitherto been available on their mechanics—the role of underestimated consumption norms in the failure of the procurements, the increasingly bureaucratic methods used in estimating and collecting “surplus” grain, and how the requisitioning campaigns influenced the famine of 1921-22. These two chapters contain the most new research, some of which is based on archival and statistical materials not previously used.

The greatest weakness of this work is that the other chapters are not as strong as these. Though Figes’s emphasis on the peasantry is refreshing and insightful, his failure to track their interactions with, at the least, district towns permits him to make an argument for peasant autonomy that might not stand up as well had these local arenas been considered. It is clear from Figes’s argument that the Communist bureaucracy spread down from the center through the urban centers and then out to the villages, yet he does not investigate the interaction of village and town with the same skill that he shows in the investigation of the VIK-village soviet interaction.

Figes also provides a very convincing discussion of the reasons for the failure of the Komuch, arguing that its inability to maintain an army of peasant conscripts, as the Bolsheviks successfully did, doomed it. The discussion of the revolution in the countryside is less orderly than other parts of the work, but this may be attributed to the rather chaotic nature of that revolution—Figes notes that localities generally dated the revolution from the day that the local estates were redivided, not from far-away political events in the capitals or provincial centers. He concludes with a discussion of the peasant uprisings, considered not as attempts to overthrow Soviet power or even to modify Soviet policies (though this last was their ultimate effect, according to Figes), but as attempts to secede and set up purely local, purely peasant societies.

In his conclusion, Figes dwells rather heavily on the irony of peasant support for a regime that ultimately adopted a policy of collectivization, withdrawing not only the benefits won by the peasantry at the end of the civil war, but even the gains of the revolution. This is slightly tendentious (as the work does not discuss the changes in the NEP years), but the chief conclusion, that two societies were created in the civil war and were only uneasily reconciled through the introduction of the NEP, is sound and well-supported by the evidence.

This is an important work not only for historians of the civil war, but for all those studying the early years of the Soviet Union. The Russian peasantry is treated here sympathetically, but not sentimentally; its actions appear to be rational and understandable. Figes’s work is a good