

These two books by German historian Stephan Merl provide a detailed economic history of the 1930s Soviet countryside, and shed light on important developments that have received little attention previously.

In Bauern unter Stalin. Merl divides rural economic history into three topics: the coercive measures applied to enforce collectivization, private farming in the 1930s, and income distribution and incentive systems within the kolkhoz. In the first Merl shows the close relation between dekulakization and collectivization by identifying a second wave of dekulakization in 1931, which the regime initiated after less coercive measures in the fall of 1930 failed to bring many peasants into kolkhozy. Merl provides a systematic account of Soviet taxation policy in the countryside, even calculating the (for them) exorbitant amounts that peasants paid and outlining the frequent changes taxation underwent in order to serve the contradictory goals of enforcing collectivization and extracting resources. He also describes briefly the forced resettlement of khutor households (separate homestead farms, most common in the western regions), a near-repetition of dekulakization at the end of the decade that has been neglected in the literature.

The second topic examines the two private sectors in agriculture in the 1930s: the edinolichniki (the remaining non-collectivized peasants) and the kolkhozniki's private plot farms. The regime tolerated edinolichniki in 1930 after the collapse of the first collectivization drive, then cracked down with new legal restrictions and taxes. High inflation and lax enforcement, however, allowed many to survive into the mid-1930s, when the regime reinforced sanctions to close off the alternative they represented to the kolkhoz. As late as 1937, for example, many kolkhozniki took their large income distributions from that year's good harvest, bought a horse, and left their kolkhozy to work alongside the remaining edinolichniki in the carrying trade. A new horse tax cut this short.

For the private plot, the pattern was different: the famine forced the regime to tolerate the private sector within the kolkhoz until 1939, when the authorities began imposing restrictions and high taxes on it. Merl questions the effectiveness of these coercive measures against private production. While the regime did eventually eliminate the edinolichniki, the Soviet economy continued to depend upon the private sector within the kolkhoz in this period and after.

In the third part, Merl documents the deprivation and poverty of kolkhozniki and kolkhozy: some entire kolkhozy, for example, earned less than an ordinary worker's family. Merl traces this poverty back to the regime's extremely low pro-
curement prices, a problem Soviet leaders recognized but could change only after Stalin’s death. Kolkhozniki, Merl contends, received very little for the labordays they earned in the kolkhoz. Instead, they survived on a kind of “minimum wage,” in the form of advances issued during the threshing, independent of labordays and procurements. And he argues that incentive systems introduced into the kolkhozy in the 1930s, such as Stakhanovism, had little effect on production and morale.

In Bauern unter Stalin, Merl does a remarkable job of extracting revealing data from published sources and the Smolensk archive. He does, however, show these sources’ limitations, especially regarding the reasons for most of the regime’s policies, and the book thus raises many questions. Bauern unter Stalin is a study of how the regime, as it were, “captured” and then exploited the peasantry. The means to these ends, however, were contradictory, and the regime switched from one extreme to the other in response to crises, the peasants’ actions, and its own priorities. This is an accurate and accepted model of Soviet agricultural policy. In his conclusion, however, Merl raises the question of the survival of traditional peasant values in the kolkhoz, noting that, like the commune it replaced, it cannot be seen only as a forced union. If this was the case, then the regime may not have controlled the peasants to the extent that Merl argues they did. At least it brings up another side to the story Merl tells, one that he does not investigate.

The book has two main inaccuracies. First, Merl’s analysis of the causes of the 1933 famine is inconsistent with his own data and with sources he included in his bibliography. He accepts with minor alterations the official harvest figures for 1931-33 which are all about the same and do not show a particularly low harvest in 1932. Consequently, he can only speculate that the famine resulted from a regional imbalance in the 1932 harvest that left a smaller crop in the grain regions, where the regime focused the procurements campaigns, and that the 1933 harvest may have been larger.

Merl’s data, however, show a decline in the harvest in Ukraine of four million tons between 1931 and 1932, and then two pages later a decline in those years’ grain procurements of the same amount. These data suggest that the regime reduced its procurement quota in 1932 in response to a smaller harvest, and other sources that Merl does not use confirm this. He also ignores works by Otto Schiller, the German agricultural attaché in the 1930s, and this reviewer, both listed in his bibliography, which show that a 1932 harvest much smaller than officially acknowledged was a primary cause of the famine.

These points are important because in Merl’s view the famine and the factors that caused it defined the basic structure of Soviet rural history in the 1930s. If a genuine small harvest, possibly a result of natural factors, lay behind the famine, then the regime’s policies in the early and mid-1930s reflected intentions and objectives different from those Merl proposes.

Finally, Merl argues that in 1939 the regime turned against the private sector, raising taxes and imposing restrictions on the kolkhozniki’s private plots and livestock, anticipating Stalin’s plans in the early 1950s to eliminate the private