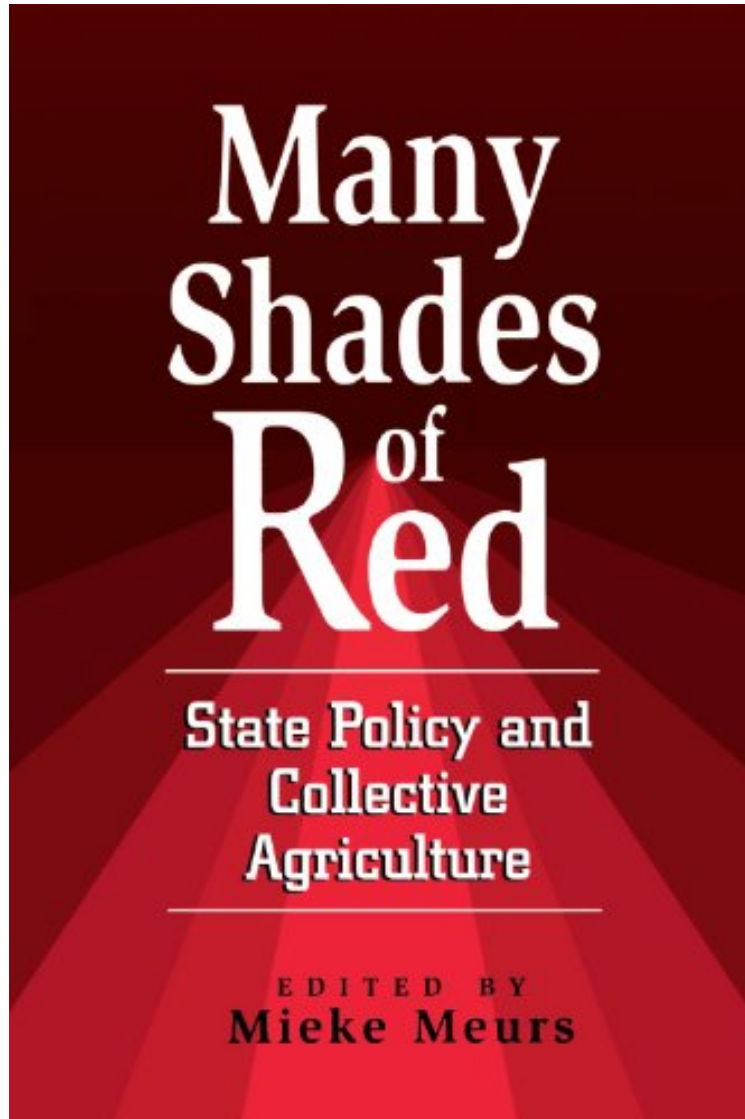


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## Many Shades of Red: State Policy and Collective Agriculture

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**From Rowman Littlefield Publishers :** **Many Shades of Red: State Policy and Collective Agriculture** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised **Many Shades of Red: State Policy and Collective Agriculture**:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Interesting, but Incomplete and Dated by NowBy Loyd EskildsonIn "Many Shades of Red" author Meurs reviews agricultural collectivization in Bulgaria, China, Cuba, Hungary, and Russia, emphasizing China and Russia. Government encouragement of collectivization ranged from use of force to incentives, and results varied from massive starvation (estimated at 30 million in China, 3-5 million in Russia) to increased mechanization and improvement of rural living standards. With the exception of Bulgaria and China,

collectivization took place in environs with vast expanses of property, extensive landlessness, and stagnated productivity. Meurs asserts that reanalysis is important because about 75% of the world's population still works in agriculture. Another concern is the possibly negative impact of Global Warming on overall agriculture. Only about 8% of Russia is arable, and only a small portion of that is irrigated. Collectivization of peasant farms in Russia was a tragedy for many, costing 3-5 million their lives via starvation and executions. Surprisingly, however, many did not take advantage of the opportunity to leave when dissolution of the socialist system began - it remained the dominant form of production despite its failures. Meurs' explanation is based on lack of rural processing and marketing services, and fear families would lose eligibility for farm subsidies and social services provided by local collective farms. The solution was to reorganize those farms as corporations and turn them over to the workers and pensioners. Prior to 1917 Russian agriculture was irrefutably backward. About one-third of the land was owned by landlords, the Tsar's family, the church, and the state. Over half of that was rented to peasants, and manual labor and private consumption of the output dominated. American farmers at the time were almost 5X as productive. A significant portion of Russian farm output was claimed by the state, landlords, and moneylenders. Demand for liquidation of private land ownership became the most important slogan of the 1917 Revolution, and was accomplished soon afterwards. Ten years later, cooperatives comprised no more than 2% of cultivated land. There were 24-25 million peasant farms, averaging 4-5 hectares (about 10 acres), with 1 horse and two cows. The most prosperous 3-4% had about one-third the total machinery. Kulaks (affluent peasants - about 4%) charged 100% interest for loans to poorer farmers during the 4-5 months until harvest. Renting horses brought their claims to 1/3 of the harvest, 1/2 when equipment was also included. By 1929, state-provided consumer co-ops provided consumer goods at wholesales prices, and also provided credit and marketing channels. Mandatory collectivization of the land emerged in response to the government's problems extracting steep grain levies to support its industrialization. Farmers frequently responded with 'terrorism' against collecting agents and agencies, with government retribution usually following. Production fell because of the resistance, in turn generating greater repression. A 1928 famine dramatically reduced livestock numbers; thirty years was required to return to those 1928 levels. Private plots represented only 3% of total sown area in the 1980s, but produced over 25% of output. Farmers were paid the same regardless of productivity. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 again dropped livestock numbers by one-half, and the area planted to grains fell 25%. Yields fell further because fertilizer use also fell. Production is now recovering, though still far below 1990 levels. Individual farms now produce 59% of agricultural output on 20% of the land. Farmers have difficulty obtaining loans because of restrictions against non-agricultural use of land currently farmed; laws only allow land sales by the state. China followed a remarkably similar path to collectivization. Independent family farms had been the tradition in China for thousands of years prior to the communist takeover in 1949. Farmlands were small, fragmented, and nearly half owned by landlords and leased to peasants. Rent was often 50% of the output. Under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) land was confiscated from landlords without compensation and distributed to tenants. Originally collectivization was voluntary, but encouraged. Productivity, however, lagged Taiwan, Singapore, and Korea. After 1955 it was mandatory, and grain output increased 22% from 1952 to 1958. This encouraged larger collectivization units, and at the end of 1958, 99% of rural households were in communes, averaging 5,000 households, and 10,000 acres. The envisioned productivity improvements (less fragmentation, more mechanization) would allow freed-up labor to improve irrigation and build dams. At the time, agriculture contributed about 60% of China's foreign exchange earnings. Increased output would be used as capital to acquire an industrial base - ironically with help from Russia. However, gross agricultural output fell 15% in 1959, another 16% in 1960, and then stayed there for another year. Thirty million died as a result. "Many Shades of Red" attributes the main cause to bad weather; other sources also name major management mistakes - over-seeding crops (crowding reduced yield), a campaign to drive away and kill sparrows because they ate grain (insects flourished), deep plowing (buried the topsoil), taking moderately productive land out of production to concentrate fertilize on the most productive, diversion of many agricultural workers to steel production during harvesting (crops rotted in the fields), melting down essential farm tools to feed backyard iron furnaces, continuation of massive grain exports, and a substantial reduction in incentives to work also contributed to the shortage of food. Production management was then refocused on smaller teams of 20-30 households, prices paid farmers raised 28%, priority emphasis returned to agriculture, new dwarf varieties of rice and wheat introduced, mechanization increased, and engine-powered irrigation expanded. Most studies, however, show that production continued to decline until decollectivization in 1978. After Deng Xiaoping became leader in 1978, Xiaogang village provided the demonstration project that quickly ended collectivization - 18 farmers secretly broke up their commune land and other assets in 1978 into private segments, and quickly prospered; previously their families had been reduced to begging. Even greater increases began in 1984 when households were also allowed to sell above-quota production at market rates. Wheat production, for example, peaked in 1997 (123 million tons), vs. 13.8 in 1949, 14.2 in 1961, and 62.7 in 1979. Rice peaked the same year at 192 million tons, vs. 48.6 in 1949, 53.6 in 1961, and 143.8 in 1979. (U.S.D.A. China - National Results) Productivity improvement (eg. via mechanization, plot consolidation and co-location), as best I can determine, is not a current priority for China as it would simply increase unemployment. ("Status of China's Agricultural Enterprise Management and Countermeasures," 6/1/2009) Collective agriculture proved efficient at

extracting resources from peasants because it took away their control of resources. This did not, however, necessarily translate into extracting more resources from agriculture. Production in both Russia and China declined due to destruction of incentives, as well as in the case of China, poor management directives. Using agriculture as a 'cash cow' (underpaid workers) in both Russia and China further reduced incentives. Meurs believes that collectivization should improve productivity in instances where plots are too fragmented to support mechanization - however, his China data do not support this, and it is not clear what caused production in Russia to drop when decollectivized - probably part of the general economic collapse caused by the 'shock treatment' of suddenly ending subsidies.

This volume provides a radical and timely corrective to received wisdom about the seemingly inevitable transition from communism to democratic capitalism. Arguing against popular misconceptions that portray collectivized agriculture as an unqualified failure that followed a monolithic Soviet model, the contributors draw upon newly available local sources to illuminate the costs, benefits, successes, and failures of cooperative agriculture. They highlight the wide variety of state policies, local responses, and economic outcomes, as well as the influence of local geography, political structures, and economic institutions in each region. Meurs provides an institutionalist analysis of both the causes and impacts of policy differences, drawing lessons of continuing relevance to the many countries in which agrarian reform remains a controversial issue. Contributions by: Victor Danilov, Carmen Diana Deere, Stanka Dobрева, Veska Kouzharova, Imre Kovach, Justin Lin, Mieke Meurs, and Niurka Perez.

The volume succeeds brilliantly in showing the diverse experiences with collective agriculture. The book is essential reading for anyone interested in agricultural policy, and for scholars and practitioners of rural development. (Eastern Economic Journal) I found many interesting ideas and materials in this collection. (Frederic L. Pryor, Swarthmore College Slavic ) About the Author Mieke Meurs is associate professor of economics at American University.