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Postwar land reforms in comparative perspective

Abstract

In our present paper, we have endeavoured to rethink an element of agrarian history, the postwar land reforms, from a comparative perspective. We have transcended national narratives and compared the Hungarian with Poland on the one hand, and East Germany on the other. In the first half of our paper we compared the competing land reform visions of different parties in Poland and Hungary, in the second we compared the mechanics of distributing the feudal large estates in the Soviet Occupation Zone and Hungary.

Keywords: land reform, World War II, Poland, Hungary, East Germany, comparative research

The agrarian structure of Europe changed significantly after the First World War. Land reform, widely defined to mean anything changing property rights for rural land, such as changes in landownership and tenure and attempts to deal with the fragmentation of land holdings, affected almost every European country after the First World War. “The emergence of the peasant as an active factor in the political and social life of Europe was perhaps the most telling and certainly the least expected effect of the First World War and a striking phenomenon in the social history of the Continent between the two wars.”

The crisis released long run forces of change, and in two decades the ownership of large areas of farmland changed, especially in Eastern Europe. Politically this period can be identified as the one that saw the end of the big rural landowners in Europe, or, if not the final end, at least the beginning of the end. Culturally it was the one that established peasant farming as the symbol of traditional values. Whether it had any great economic effect is more questionable, although it might be argued that the income and wealth distribution impacts of the changes were seen as more important that the production effects, but in social terms it seems clear that this was the period in which the ideal of the family farm was established across Europe, and that become a model for land reform after the Second World War.

The Reforms in Outline

Although land reforms were implemented almost everywhere in Eastern Europe after the First World War (the Junker estates of eastern Germany being the

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major exception), they were not pursued with equal vigour. The most radical reform took place in Romania, the most radical policies being pursued in the newly acquired territories of Transylvania and Bessarabia, where the majority of the large owners were not ethnic Romanians. In Bulgaria and the Serbian part of the country that was to become Yugoslavia, land reform was scarcely necessary because the majority of the land was already in small peasant holdings. In Bulgaria reform was introduced nevertheless under the radical agrarian rule of Alexander Stamboliiski, while reform in Yugoslavia was necessary in Croatia (to the detriment of Hungarian aristocrats) and Bosnia and Hercegovina. In Hungary very modest measures were implemented in the 1920s when Hungary’s Old Right were securely in power, although Károly’s 1918 republican government had begun more radical measures, and the Soviet Republic had attempted full collectivisation in 1919. The Polish and Czechoslovak governments passed quite radical laws, but their implementation was patchy. After his coup in 1926 Piłsudski came to an understanding with the aristocracy which slowed the reform, while in Czechoslovakia the Ministry of Agriculture was consistently in the hands of the Agrarian Party which, despite its ideological commitment to the ‘peasant’ appeared in its (in)actions to favour those with large holdings. As a consequence, with the ending of the Second World War many felt that the first round of reforms was unfinished; this was explicit in Czechoslovakia where the 1947 measures were conceived as being the completion of the earlier, unsuccessful reform.

The Second World War land reforms were all conceived within the framework of the Popular Front politics that characterised the Allies’ vision of the post-war world. It figured in: Manifesto of Polish Committee of National Liberation, July 1944; Szeged Programme of National Independence Front, December 1944; and Košice Programme of Czechoslovak National Front, April 1945. And, as with the post-World war One reforms, there was a strong nationalist component to many of the reforms in that German land in particular was a major source of land (as the following table suggests). The focus on national rather than class land in Czechoslovakia proved to be grounds for tension between the Czechoslovak Communist Party (which favoured an anti-German policy) and the Slovak Communist Party (which, faced with little German land and much less Hungarian land than there was German land in Bohemia and Moravia, favoured a class-based approach to satisfy the land-hunger of its larger number of poorer peasants). German land was an important source of land too in Romania and Yugoslavia (where the title of the key act was The Law on Agricultural

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Reform and Colonisation), and, of course in Poland where the resettlement of the ‘Regained Territories’ that had previously been part of Germany was also a process of colonisation. 5

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Date of Reform</th>
<th>Upper Limit (hectares)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>12/3/46</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30 hectares in S. Dobrudzha. 15/4/45 already decree on ‘lower type’ labour coop farms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Czechoslovakia</td>
<td>21/6/45</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>German/Hungarian land only in 1945. 250 hectares limit in July 1947, 50ha limit March 1948</td>
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<td>Hungary</td>
<td>17/3/45</td>
<td>115.1</td>
<td>57.55 hectares limit for landed gentry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>6/9/44</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Ave 7 hectares distributed in former German territories, 76% in total from German land</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>22/3/45</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>24% German land. Royal lands taken 1948. 1949 remaining land of 50 hectares taken</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yugoslavia</td>
<td>23/8/45</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>25-35 hectares cultivable land. 41% German land. Law on Agric Reform and Colonisation. End 1945 committed to Peasant Work Coops</td>
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<td>East Germany</td>
<td>3/9/45</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>The Junker landlords were dispossessed and expelled.</td>
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The Post-Land Reform Visions and Contrasting Approaches to Reform

Although the subject of whether or not Stalin had a blueprint for Eastern Europe from the start which envisaged incorporation of all of Eastern Europe into the Soviet sphere of influence and the introduction of fully fledge socialist planning and collectivisation remains a question of perennial interest, most recent historiography inclines towards the view that there were significant national differences and that popular front policies such as land reform were not introduced cynically as a stepping stone to collectivisation. The reforms were in fact relatively modest. As the Polish examples below reveal, the communist parties were in most countries at pains to hold back the radicals who did not want propertied peasants to benefit. Only in Bulgaria and Yugoslavia were there early attempts to move directly to collectivisation, and these were frowned on by Moscow. 6

But, in fact, there was a good argument to say that the reforms were not a lasting solution. Doreen Warriner, a development economist, expert on land reform in Central Europe and the developing world, and an academic at London’s School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies from 1947 to 1966, made the following comment:

„No one who knew what East European farming was like before can doubt that it was necessary to reorganise the farm system. The problem was the great number of small farms ... The new land reform had done nothing to tackle this problem; on the contrary, it created more small farms than before ... the next step necessarily had to be towards combining small farms into bigger units.”

Furthermore, Warriner predicted more rather than less conflict in villages: „The result of the reform has not been to equalise peasant property, but to increase the potential conflict between the interests of large and small peasants. ... The root of the problem, too much labour on the land, cannot be solved only in terms of redistribution of property. ... Clearly the reforms were the preliminary to further change; they were not the final solution, though they were a necessary step towards it”.

By removing the landed aristocracy from the scene, the very real conflicts of interest between richer and poorer peasants were placed in sharper relief. The idea of peasant harmony on which much peasant politics relied would be exposed to even sharper scrutiny; and some further change was inevitable.

The dilemma was the same as everywhere: do you place a ‘wager on the strong’ as Stolypin tried to do in pre-revolutionary Russia, create a prosperous, efficient agriculture and hope that rapid industrialisation and urbanisation siphons the agrarian poor into industry and the city (and if not, to slums on the outskirts of the cities), or do you favour justice rather than efficiency, give land to all who have a valid claim, encourage co-operation (but not necessarily collectivisation) and also hope that industrialisation and urbanisation will siphon off the agrarian poor?

Proponents of the first vision favour more prosperous farmers, see it as important to establish unambiguous property rights to ease the future land market, and therefore favour the use of experts in organising the parcellisation of land. Proponents of the second vision see no need for experts, see the restrictions on future sale of land as permanent and therefore not requiring the intervention of experts. For justice, speed and the intervention of those affected supported by ‘activists’ is the key.

These contrasting visions of the post-land reform future are reflected to some extent in the policies of the Peasant Parties which were active within the Popular Front governments. Where they remained in the political spectrum (and the Agrarians were excluded from Czechoslovak politics because of their compromised pre-war and wartime past), they very soon became ‘catch-all’ parties of the political Right, usually because they were the only parties within the Popular Front spectrum that unambiguously supported private property. Before this catch-all phase, their agrarian policies had reflected the ‘wager on the strong’ approach, in

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2 Ibid. 140-1.
contrast to communist parties which favoured the alternative vision. Their commitment to capitalism was more ambiguous. The Smallholder’s 1930 programme talked of abolishing the oppression of circulating capital on the Hungarian people, while the land reform proposal, discussed more fully below, made it clear that banks, shareholder companies and other enterprises could not own land. The question of the agrarian vision of those involved in land reforms, and the agricultural policies of the peasant parties is something that has disappeared from the historical agenda. Economic and social historians focus on the measures themselves and their economic and social consequences; political historians focus on the political struggle between the communist and peasant parties. Krystyna Kersten’s long study of the establishment of communism in Poland scarcely mentions the land reform. Korbonski’s book, which informs much of our discussion of Poland, was published in 1965.

**Competing Visions in Poland and in Hungary**

Poland and Hungary are appropriate countries for interrogating competing visions of land reform because in these two countries the reform debates were introduced in the context of competing parties with more or less public agrarian programmes (communists versus the Peasant Party in Poland, and communists in association with the National Peasant Party (NPP) versus the Smallholders’ Party in Hungary).

In Poland, alternative visions of the future for agriculture impinged on two occasions. First, there were disagreements early on about the mechanics of the reform. Under the leadership of A. Witos, younger brother of the famous inter-war Polish peasant politician Wincenty Witos, *Wola Ludu* (a grouping of communist-friendly Peasant Party members who participated in the Polish Committee of National Liberation and illegally took the name Peasant Party in September 1944) favoured a reform model under which Land Offices and their staff would be used to supervise the land reform. The communists had reservations about this idea, but in the spirit of Popular Front politics decided to accept it. Preparations for reform had begun in the summer of 1944 in response to two political rather than military imperatives: the need for the Moscow-backed representatives of Poland to have a policy more radical than anything Mikołajczyk in London might offer, and diverting attention from Soviet failure to support the Warsaw rising.

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15 Ibid. 72-73.
But things did not go according to the communists’ expectations. Peasants and agricultural labourers were initially hesitant to claim their land, perhaps because of the greater general uncertainty at the time: the future borders of the country were still unclear; and there was an alternative government in London which opposed the reform. It did not take long for the communists to explain this hesitancy in terms of sabotage on the part of the Land Offices and their staff. Pressure built up over the course of September 1944 and on 10 October 1944 Witos was obliged to resign.\footnote{KORBONSKI (1965): 74-80.}

The Communist Party had set itself a somewhat contradictory agenda. It was obliged to question the Wola Ludu vision and the role of experts which was in danger of slowing down reform and restricting its ‘revolutionary’ nature. Yet the principles of the reform had been agreed within the Front government; landed peasants were to be included amongst its beneficiaries, despite the more radical vision of grassroots activists. The national party had to remind the local activists that they could not privilege agricultural labourers at the expense of wealthier landed peasants. They had to conform to the spirit of Popular Front government while at the same time rejecting a ‘wager on the strong’ vision of the agrarian future.

At a Central Committee meeting of 9 October 1944, Gomułka (referred to by his pseudonym) invoked Stalin to criticise their failure to use revolutionary techniques, while other members were critical of the role of Land Offices in slowing down reform.

Gomułka: ‘Stalin considers that the slow pace of land reform will give our opponents a chance to organise. [He] does not think we are using revolutionary techniques. The abolition of a whole class is not a reform but a revolution and cannot be executed with the full majesty of the law.’\footnote{POLONSKY, Antony – DRUKIER, Bolesław: The Beginnings of Communist Rule in Poland. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston, Henly, 1980. 300.}

Zawadzki: ‘The function of the Land Offices should be limited to technical matters, whereas the Peasants’ Committees should be bolstered. We should arrest every single landowner and farm manager. Then the peasants will stop vacillating.’\footnote{Ibid.}

Zambrowski: ‘80% of the staff of the Land Offices are ex-officers. Using them it will take three years to measure out the land.’\footnote{POLONSKY – DRUKIER (1980): 301.}

Criticisms of the Land Offices were repeated at an activists’ conference in Lublin held on 10-11 October 1944.

Białystok region secretary: ‘I was very relieved and happy when I heard that Witos had been dismissed. The reactionary influences at the top of the Agriculture and Land Reform Department were very visible initially in Białystok. At the second briefing for the brigades, on 15 September, the director of the provincial Land
Office was very critical of the decree, saying that the land reform had been devised by politicians and not by the experts and that it could only be carried out after a year, because there were no surveyors etc. We made it clear that this kind of attitude was sabotage, the land could be measured out by foot or with wooden fathom measures so that the peasants would get their land in the prescribed time. The reactionaries in the Land Office desisted in their attacks for a time, but this lasted only until Majer, Witos’s delegate arrived.20

At the same conference, Gomulka felt obliged to warn them of the danger of extreme radicalism.

“I would like to point out one error of the Bialstok PPR. They decided to allocate two-thirds of the land on one farm to agricultural labourers, leaving only one third for the peasants. This is wrong because peasants have the same rights as agricultural labourers. They cannot get less than the labourers. … We must never forget that the sooner the land is redistributed, the weaker Mikolajczyk’s position will be.”21

Similar views were expressed at the party’s National Conference 12-13 November 1944 in a speech by Zambrowski on the land reform.

“It is the intention of the PKWN … that all the basic categories of peasants are eligible to receive land. This has not been the case in practice. There has been a universal trend to favour agricultural labourers at the expense of peasants. [Also] a tendency to exclude the middle peasants, even those with large families, from the subdivision.”22

By February 1945, the Communist Party narrative of Poland’s land reform was becoming clear, as Zambrowski elaborated in a speech to that month’s party plenum.

“The land reform in the formerly liberated territories took place in the face of the determined resistance of Polish reaction, of the landowners who … terrorised the peasantry spreading rumours that the London émigrés would return to power and that those who took land would be punished.

The land reform was carried out, breaking the sabotage of the Land Offices … which were penetrated by reactionary elements.

There were hesitations in the part of the Peasant Party where a small group proposed a theory of a land reform which would create ‘productive’ rural holdings, a theory whereby a land reform …. would give land to the peasant possessing more than 10 hectares but in which the landless, the small and medium peasants with less than 10 hectares would not receive land.

[There was a failure to understand that land reform could not be carried out if matters were not handed over to the mass of peasants themselves, to the hands of bodies elected by the peasantry, which would decide who was to benefit from the

21 Ibid. 349.
22 Ibid. 369.
land reform and how much land in a given place was to be given to every peasant.\textsuperscript{23}

It was clear who the enemies of the communist vision of land reform were: ‘experts’ who slowed the process down and de-radicalised it, and the proponents of a vision of a future agriculture based on prosperous family farms.

Some months later, in July 1945, Mikołajczyk returned to Poland from London as head of the Polish Peasant Party and was made Minister of Agriculture. He called for a peasant Poland based on strong independent farms, hoping that overpopulation would be solved ‘in some unspecified way’.\textsuperscript{24} Encouraged by this, some landowners, who felt that the activist-led land reform that followed Witos’s removal had treated them unjustly, tried to go to court to get some of their land back. This prompted an immediate counterattack on the part of the communists, focusing on both Mikołajczyk himself and the Land Offices. In September 1945 police were instructed that all attempts to remove peasants from their newly acquired land should be resisted and those that already been dispossessed should be moved back. ‘This measure apparently proved decisive and there is no indication of any further questioning of the legality of the reforms.’\textsuperscript{25}

In Hungary where, as is discussed more fully below, Soviet pressure was for an extremely rapid reform, there were similarly competing visions regarding the role of experts and the pace of reform; but Soviet pressure in the winter and spring of 1945 accelerated even the most radical of domestic proposals.\textsuperscript{26} National Peasant Party and Communist Party documentation referred to completion by October.\textsuperscript{27} Following Soviet pressure, this was brought forward to so that the aim became having the reform 75% completed by the end of April 1945.\textsuperscript{28}

In the ‘suitcase’ of the Communist leaders returning from emigration in Moscow there was already a detailed programme for land reform which had been elaborated by Imre Nagy, their agricultural expert, who had written extensively in the interwar years on the need for such reform.\textsuperscript{29} Rather than impose this vision directly, the Communist Party felt, in December 1944, that it would be politically more acceptable if the initial proposal were to come from the National Peasant

\textsuperscript{24}Korbonski (1965): 47-48. 84.
\textsuperscript{25}Ibid. 85.
Party which was seen as the representative of poorer sections of the peasantry. This decision was ratified by the central leadership on 5 January 1945.30 During the war the Communist Party had talked of a 172.65 hectare (300 katasztralis hold) upper limit, rather than the 287.75 hectare (500 katasztralis hold) limit of the left-wing intellectuals who had made up the New March Front of 15 March 1937.31 In October 1944, in an unpublished document, an upper limit of 115.1 hectares (200 katasztralis hold) was set, although no upper limit figured in the party proposal that appeared in November or the December programme of the Hungarian National Independence Front.32 But by the time that the Communist Party was discussing the final version of the plan with the NPP prior to its launch, it had persuaded itself that the time was not opportune to ‘open a front against large-scale peasant farmers’.33 The NPP, which had considered lowering the limit to 28.76 hectares (50 katasztralis hold),34 had to be persuaded of the merits of a differentiated, ‘gentry holdings one hundred [katasztralis hold (57.55 ha)], peasant holdings two hundred [katasztralis hold (151.1 ha)]’ policy, which, according to Ferenc Erdei who was in charge of drafting the NPP proposal, had never entered their minds since gentry and rich peasants alike acted against the interests of their small peasant supporters.35 As soon as the land reform proposals had been published, delegations of poor peasants and estate workers, mobilised by the communists, the NPP, local organisations of the Smallholders and the Trade Union of Land Labourers, approached the Provisional Government demanding the implementation of the reform;36 and by February the communists were calling for the immediate formation of land claimants’ committees.37

An inter-party meeting was held on 15 March 1945 to discuss the land reform proposal; the plan was accepted by the provisional Council of Ministers on 17th and published on the 18th.38 The discussion was hastily convened, or Ferenc Nagy of the Smallholders was invited as an afterthought; he was working on the party’s latest reform proposal in Budapest when he was hurried into a car and driven over night to Debrecen to participate.39 The communists were insistent that the decree should be published on 15 March, Hungary’s national day and anniversary of the 1848 revolution, and arrived with a ready-made decree with that date already on it.40 Embittered as he was that three key proposals from his plan were ignored,

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32 ORBÁN (1972): 24-25.
33 Ibid. 26.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
39 NAGY (1948): 142.
Ferenc Nagy was able to insist that recipients receive a written document identifying their land.42 Imre Kovács of the NPP reported that the meeting was equally hostile to his proposals which, as well as a suggestion of a two-stage reform, questioned the different upper limits for peasants and the landed gentry, a distinction which he felt was unjust and stupid. Overall, he felt that they were present simply to rubber stamp a decision that had already been taken.42

As in Poland, the central leadership had to rein in the enthusiasm of local cadres. At the end of March Rákosi wrote to Gerő complaining that the land reform was dominated too much by the communists, that other parties should be involved, and that it would be good to give land to a priest and make sure that the media covered it.43 Nevertheless the party leadership also stressed that the other parties should not be allowed to put the brakes on the tempo of reform.44

Although the Smallholders’ Party did not judge it politic to submit its programme at the time of the debate on 15 March (Donáth speculates that it was intended for a ‘full’ session of the government once the whole of Hungary had been liberated),45 a version that was finally published after the completion of collectivisation reveals a radically different vision. The plan was more large-scale-farmer-friendly in a number of ways, such as allowing all except war criminals 57.55 hectares (100 katasztralis hold) of land, suggesting that there should be at least one 230.2-287.75 hectare (4-500 katasztralis hold) farm per district to serve as a model, and in specifying compensation amounts. But the key difference was in the conception: land was to be awarded on the basis of providing a holding that could support a family of eight, a formulation akin to the Polish Peasant Party’s vision of the 10 hectare farm referred to by Zambrowski above. ‘Dwarf’ landholders should disappear from the village and not reappear.46 Many would lose out, of course, but, in a vision scarcely better specified than Mikołajczyk’s, it assumed there would be land available elsewhere in the country and that the poor would just have to move. Yet one of the problems with the reform was simply that there was insufficient land to go round. As it was, former agricultural servants resident in barracks outside villages felt the village-based claimants committees excluded them unfairly.47 Under the Smallholder proposal, these would remain landless, with the hope that industrialisation would eventually siphon them off the land.

The second big difference related to the organisation of the reform. The communist-NPP proposal called for committees of beneficiaries in every village – the land claimants’ committees – who would, and did, operate without assistance from experts. The Smallholder reform, by contrast, proposed a district-level

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41 NAGY (1948): 143-45.
44 ORBÁN (1972): 32.
committee made up of two claimants and two disinterested smallholder peasants, to work in tandem with the district court which would provide specialist advice.48 Furthermore, there would be an additional committee charged with assessing what size of farm was necessary for a family of eight, whose chair would be a ‘certified farmer’ appointed by the district or county economic supervision organisation.49 The Smallholder Plan further insisted that in fruit or vegetable-growing areas beneficiaries would have had to have completed a training course in the relevant branch of agriculture.50 As in Poland, then, the differences related to the role of expertise and its possible negative impact on a fast and equitable solution. To the Communist mindset, expertise and ‘neutral’ assessors were unnecessary complications, if not delaying tactics and sabotage, which would slow down reform as had briefly happened in Poland (although no explicit reference was made to Poland); to the Smallholders, experts were necessary in order to award viable farms and implement their vision of prosperous family farming.

After its electoral victory of 4 November 1945, the Smallholder vision briefly gained political traction, and to a greater degree than its Polish equivalent had when Mikołajczyk was Minister of Agriculture, although the parallels are striking. The communists had retained the Ministry of Agriculture as an ‘institutional guarantee of the completion of the land reform’,51 but at the grassroots level communist authority was challenged. All accounts agree that the speed of the land reform and the overall shortage of available land had resulted in some infringements of the regulations, particularly regarding the distinction between ‘gentry’ and ‘peasant’ holdings, and hence in what could be perceived as injustices.52 Ferenc Nagy raised the issue of such injustices in parliament on 1 August 1945; Imre Nagy did not dispute the facts, merely noting that such ‘excesses’ did not vitiate the value of the reform.53 Following the elections, and perhaps inspired by Cardinal Mindszenty’s pastoral letter of 18 October 1945, some landowners, as in Poland, went to court in order to gain redress and reverse such perceived injustices, with the support of some Smallholder politicians. In January 1946 Mihály Kerék, Smallholder head of the National Land Office, even called for revision of the land reform on a legal basis.54 Such measures prompted a backlash from those who had newly received land. The land claimants’ committees appealed to their national organisation; demonstrations (spontaneous and orchestrated) took place; and slogans such as ‘we will not give back land’ contributed to the tense political situation which resulted in the establishment of

49 ibid. 285.
50 ibid. 286.
the Left-Wing Block on 7 March 1946. The latter gave the Smallholders an ultimatum to back nationalisation, complete the land reform and decrease the number of civil servants. A few days later they demanded the exclusion of around eight Smallholder members of parliament: Rákosi’s famous salami tactics had begun. The struggle of the communists against the major party representing peasant interests subsequently became a matter of power politics rather than competing agrarian visions, as it had in Poland once the land reform had been placed beyond question.

**East Germany and Hungary in comparison**

As is clear from the analysis so far, the Soviet Union has to be included in any discussion on the land reforms following World War II, Yet the Soviet Union is a participant that is hardly ever mentioned in papers published prior to 1989 in Central-Eastern-Europe. The disclosure of party archives provided access to sources that may meet a long felt need.

As is well known, large estates made up the dominant part of landed property in Hungary as well as Eastern Germany up to 1945. In the interwar period Hungary became Europe’s large estate country in the most extreme sense of the word. Nearly half of the country’s arable land was owned by a few dozen of aristocratic families, yet the proportion of non-aristocratic large estates was high. The proportion of estates larger than 100 ha in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SBZ) was somewhat smaller at close to 30% of all arable land.

It is also well known that both countries had closed World War II on the side of the defeated and experienced Soviet occupation as a result. In the following section we attempt to give an overview of the similarities and differences in the ways in which the Soviet Union exerted influence and pressure on Hungary and Eastern Germany respectively concerning the reform of landed property.

As we have seen, the leaders of the Hungarian Communist Party (MKP) had returned from their exile in Moscow with an elaborate plan of the reform of landed property. They were aware that the peasantry had been distrustful to them due to the Soviet Republic’s nationalization of landed property back in 1919, and this had been part of their motivation for concluding an agreement with members of the NPP that had been representing the poor peasants. As a result, the NPP was the first organization to publicly undertake a concept that was in accordance with the plan the communists had brought along from Moscow.

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Politicians of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) living in exile in Moscow – Wilhelm Pieck, Walter Ulbricht and the agrarian expert Edwin Hoernle – had also concretized their idea of the reform of landed property in the autumn of 1944. Even though the KPD planned the reform to be a facilitating factor behind a massive anti-Nazi movement on the home front in areas yet to be liberated, by early 1945, this plan proved illusory.

In Hungary, however, where the leaders of the MKP returned simultaneously with the advance of the Red Army, the military interest of the Soviet Union did play an important role. Voroshilov, the president of the Allied Control Commission, had informed the Hungarian leaders that the land reform was to be executed without delay. His reasoning was based on military interests — that is, a rapid distribution of land could bring about the dissolution of the Hungarian Army still fighting in Transdanubia (in western Hungary), and thus lessen Red Army losses.

Soviet pressure did not only affect timing but also the fact that the reform of landed property took effect not as an act of parliament but as a government decree. This happened in spite of the fact that the MKP itself had planned to pass the act following the full liberation of the country after the Provisional National Assembly had moved from the eastern part of the country back to the capital. What happened in fact, though, was that by the beginning of the spring working season, the land distribution had already been completed in most areas of Hungary.

In keeping with the decree on land reform issued on 17 March 1945, estates over 575.5 hectares (1000 katasztralis hold) in Hungary were expropriated, as were large leaseholds, the estates of big companies, and the lands of war criminals, the leaders of the Arrow Cross and far-right organisations. That part of peasant estates over 115.1 hectares (200 katasztralis hold), and that part of noble estates over 57.55 hectares (100 katasztralis hold), were expropriated in return for nominal compensation. The two categories were distinguished on the basis of the owner’s birth. The only exception was made in the case of those who had participated in the anti-Fascist resistance, who were allowed to retain 172.65 hectares (300 katasztralis hold).

The Soviet leadership interfered with the timing of the German reform process, too. The leaders of the KPD returned in the belief that their land reform plan had

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60 In late 1944, the plans was that the parts of large estates exceeding 150 ha should be expropriated. SCHERSTJANOI, Elke: SED-Agrarpolitik unter sowjetischer Kontrolle, 1949-53. München, Oldenbourg Verlag, 2007. 47-57.
been postponed. Stalin, however made its importance clear to them, justifying it in terms of safety policy and public supply.  

On 11 June 1945, the KPD was the first among the parties to publicly announce its program which identified the elimination of large estates along with all livestock, farm implements and buildings as one of the most urgent tasks. The other three parties — the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the liberal LDP — did not have such elaborate plans concerning the reform of landed property; but, like the Peasant Party in Poland and the Smallholders in Hungary, they did not agree with waiving compensation and also raised issues of economic efficiency.

At the conference in Potsdam, Stalin was disappointed to find that he did not manage to assert sufficiently Soviet reparations claims. Even though land reform in Germany was not an issue at the conference, Stalin came to the decision to put the reform through without further delay and without negotiations with the western powers. This was part a demonstration of power and part a test of the strength of the anti-Fascist coalition. As a result of the decision made by the Soviet Union, the leaders of the KPD held several talks with representatives of the Soviet Military Administration (SMAD). Latest archival research has enabled us to follow Soviet interference concerning estate boundaries. In the summer of 1945, the leaders of the KPD made a suggestion that the upper limit of estates in the case of wealthy peasants should be 50 hectares. This was explicitly rejected by the Soviet authorities. It has even been suggested that it was Stalin himself who made the decision on the 100-hectare upper limit, reasoning that this way the German communists would acquire only half as many enemies.

At the same time as these background talks, the land reform was highlighted in the press. By late August, it was even reported that: “Large estates remain virtually untouched, while other democratic countries like Poland, Hungary, Rumania or Bulgaria have gone energetically ahead with the reform of landed property. What is it that we are waiting for?” Newspapers under the supervision of the KPD emphasized that the land reform was the expression of the demand of

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69 Ibid. 623-634.
German people. It was at this time that the catchphrase "Junkerland in Bauernhand" the slogan of the KPD’s countryside campaign.

The ‘democratic land reform’ of 1945 was initiated not in the whole of the Soviet Occupation Zone, but in the Prussian Province of Saxony (Halle). This implied a local decision, but it was followed by almost identical measures in the other Länder and Provinzen. The decree of September announced the ‘liquidation of feudal-Junker large landed property and of the lordship of the Junker and large estate owners in the village’, and specified the terms of expropriation. All land and property was to be confiscated without compensation from war criminals and ‘war guilty’, from National Socialist leaders and from active proponents of the NSDAP.72

Comparing the concrete regulations of the reform in Eastern Germany and Hungary, we can see that while Hungarian estate size limits were below the German ones, proprietors in Hungary were allowed to keep estates smaller than 57.5 hectares. Furthermore, proprietors able to prove their anti-Fascist activities during the war were allowed to keep as much as 172.65 hectares. The Junker landlords were left with nothing in the Soviet Occupation Zone; and in most cases they were also displaced from their homes. Backed by the Soviet military, instructions were given for evacuation of manor houses and estates within 24 or 48 hours. Soviet advisors held the opinion from the beginning that this group should be isolated. Following screening procedures they were taken to reception camps and later to former concentration camps. A common justification for such measures was their sabotaging of the harvest, etc. Male family heads faced arrest and transportation to the Baltic island of Rügen, where an unknown number perished.73

Interestingly, in Hungary, the most radical measure of confiscation without compensation was directed at the Catholic church which had been the largest landowner in the country, possessing 16% of cultivated land.74 In Eastern Germany, however, church lands remained largely untouched.75

Both communist parties paid special attention to the pacification of peasant groups with ownership. To this end, in Hungary the upper limit for exemption was 115.1 hectares (200 katasztralis hold) for peasant-owned land, while at the same time it was 57.55 hectares (100 katasztralis hold) for land owned by the so-called gentry. As another measure to win the trust of the peasants in Hungary, it was emphasized right from the beginning that land was given to beneficiaries as

74 While some compensation was offered for the expropriation of secular estates, 440,257 hectares of the 496,081 hectares of landed estates belonging to the Catholic Church were distributed without compensation. KENEZ (2006): 112-113. SZAKÁCS (1998): 260-261.
private property registered in the land register. New owners were awarded an ornate certificate by the communist minister of agriculture.

Although the KPD too awarded land to German peasants, it was on a radically different basis. The confiscated large estates were united in a state-owned land fund. Those claiming land received it from this fund for their private use. But even though it was registered in the land register, this did not mean that they gained full ownership. The land distributed could not be inherited; rather it could be conveyed to descendants on the condition that they accepted to continue working it (so-called vererbbares Eigentum). Similarly, the redistributed land could not be sold or leased, nor could it be mortgaged. It could be alienated only on condition that the original beneficiary found a new owner who would take it over.

German communists emphasized that long-term leasehold rights granted by the distribution of land provided a more secure basis for private farming than regular proprietorship. As a major advantage they pointed out that the leasehold could not be taken away from new owners against their will. Furthermore, the new farms were not charged the high redemption price and new owners did not have to worry later about raised farm rents either.

The Hungarian land reform of 1945, expropriating more than one-third of the whole territory and distributing about a quarter, was the most radical land reform following World War II. Almost 60 per cent of the 3,222,800 hectares of expropriated land was distributed among 642,342 claimants—predominantly agricultural workers, farmhands and the owners of dwarf estates—while the remaining 40 per cent (mainly forests and pastureland) became the property of the state, villages or co-operatives.

Similar radicalism characterized the East German land reform in 1945. One-third of agricultural land was redistributed in a matter of months. The land was to be distributed to land-impoverished peasants (those with under 5 hectares), landless labourers, ‘resettlers’ (Umsiedler), and refugees (Flüchtlinge) from the East, municipal authorities and urban workers and employees. The parcels were generally to be no more than 5 hectares.

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78 This came to cause some difficulties because, for example, neglecting farming duties in itself was not a sufficient reason to lose one’s land. New owners could only be stripped of their land for the following reasons: receipt of a penalty which involved full confiscation of property; leaving the land and moving elsewhere; or if it was later discovered that the recipient had not been entitled to claim land because of, for instance, being a member of the Nazi party. Ibid.
79 New owners who were given land had to pay a concessionary purchase price: they had to pay the price of one year of rye crop per hectare which meant an amount between 200 and 300 Reich Marks. Poorer peasants had the opportunity for pay by instalments over ten years, agricultural workers were given a period of twenty years.
The mechanism used to carve out the holdings was the Comission for the Implementation of the Land Reform, established at community (Gemeinde), area (Kreis) and district (Bezirk) level. In each community the Comission of five-seven persons was elected by those who stood to be recipients of land. The system was similar in Hungary where, as noted above, the land reform was implemented by land claim commissions made up of claimants, who expropriated and distributed land after the gathering of data.\(^8\)

As even such a brief review demonstrates, a systematic comparison of the reforms of landed property in these two countries could be continued to great effect. Furthermore, while there has been extensive research research in this area on the local (micro-) as well as the regional-level in Germany, in Hungary, research on the land reform has been a curiously neglected topic since the political transition.\(^3\)

**Concluding remarks**

Agrarian history remains an unfashionable area of historical research, but taking history beyond the national narrative is not. In our present paper, we have endeavoured to rethink an element of agrarian history, the postwar land reforms, from a comparative perspective. We have transcended national narratives and compared the Hungarian with Poland on the one hand, and East Germany on the other. In the first half of our paper we compared the competing land reform visions of different parties in Poland and Hungary, in the second we compared the mechanics of distributing the feudal large estates in the Soviet Occupation Zone and Hungary.

The focus of our examination in the two cases was different, however, it became clear that Soviet influence merits particular attention in both cases. Studying the aims and channels of Soviet influence suggests overwhelming concern for the pattern of development in both cases but not the existence of a Soviet blueprint for the region. Soviet decision-makers paid detailed attention to the specifics of the countries that they occupied, not only to the social and economic differences between them, but to the different degrees to which their allies the communist parties were socially embedded.

It is well known, that this differentiation did not last long. In 1948, with the growing tension within the antifascist coalition, copying the Soviet model became the only acceptable way for the Communist parties of the Eastern region. However, the inheritance of the post-war land reforms lingered long, and impeded the new Soviet vision of collectivising the millions of individual peasant farms of Central-Eastern-Europe.

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