

# **Power and Policy in the Latvian Countryside**

*The Aims, Process and Effects of Collectivisation of Agriculture, 1940-1949*

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# Tiivistelmä

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoitus on antaa yleiskatsaus ja analysoida maatalouden kollektivisaatio-prosessia Latviassa vuosina 1940-1949, sekä kertoa ohjelman välittömistä vaikutuksista. Tutkimus keskittyy erityisesti kysymyksiin, miksi kollektivisaatioon ryhdyttiin ja ketkä siitä hyötyivät. Nämä ovat tärkeitä aiheita historiografian kannalta, koska ne voivat edistää keskustelua myös aikaisemmasta kollektivisaatiosta Neuvostoliitossa.

Miehittäjävaltiona Neuvostoliitolla oli selkeät ja praktiset syyt kollektivisoida Latvian maatalous. Vuoteen 1944 mennessä Neuvostohallitus oli uhattu. Itsenäinen ja porvarillinen maalaisväestö oli ristiriidassa neuvostovallan kanssa. Latvian kansa, josta suurin osa oli talonpoikia, aiheutti paljon vaivaa vastustuksellaan ja silminnähden luontaisella neuvostovastaisuudellaan. Laajalle levinnyt ja laajalti tuettu sissien vastustus juonsi juurensa edellä mainitusta neuvostovastaisuudesta ja oli terävä piikki Neuvostoliiton lihassa.

Moskovasta ohjattu kollektivisaatio oli vaiheittain tapahtuva vastaus näihin uhkiin. Se oli järjestyksenmukaisempi ja vaati enemmän aikaa kuin kollektivisaatio Neuvostoliitossa, mutta lopulta hallitus, aivan kuten Neuvostoliitossa, turvautui silkkään terroriin: valtaosa maasta kollektivisoitiin 42 000 ihmisen maastakarkoituksen jälkeen maaliskuussa 1949. Kollektivisoidussa maataloudessa, jossa talonpojat asuivat kolhooseissa ja sovhooseissa, neuvostovalta riisti heitä armotta. Maaseutu rappeutui ja sen kansan tilanne huononi.

Neuvostovalta hyötyi merkittävästi näistä muuten niin ankeista ja synkistä seurauksista: sen valtaa uhkaavat tekijät oli kumottu, sen ote lujeni ja sen varallisuus lisääntyi. Näiden lopputulosten, havainnollistavien motiivien ja selvästi ylhäältä ohjatun prosessin johdosta Latvian kollektivisaatiota voidaan kuvata hallituksen toimeenpiteeksi sen kansaa vastaan.

## Abstract

This study provides an overview and analysis of the process of collectivisation of agriculture in the Baltic state of Latvia and its immediate effects. Emphasis is placed upon explaining why collectivisation was undertaken, and to whose benefit. These are subjects of historical significance, not least because they may contribute to historiographical debate on Soviet collectivisation.

As an occupying power, the Soviet Union had clear and practical reasons for collectivising Latvian agriculture. By 1944, the Soviet regime was under siege. The independent, “bourgeois” peasantry was incompatible with the Soviets. The Latvian people, most of whom were peasants, were troublesome in their resistance and their seemingly inherent “un-Sovietness”. The widespread and widely supported guerrilla resistance that stemmed from this was also a sharp thorn in the USSR’s side.

Directed from Moscow, the process of collectivisation in Latvia was a phased response to these threats. It was more orderly and drawn-out than collectivisation in the Soviet Union, yet in the end, the regime similarly resorted to sheer terror: the vast majority of farmsteads were collectivised following mass deportations in March 1949. After collectivisation, the regime, its power secured, proceeded to exploit the rural population through the kolkhoz system, while the countryside dilapidated and its populace endured degradation.

Significant benefits accrued to the Soviet regime from these otherwise dismal results. Its threats were neutralised, its grasp was expanded, its wealth was added to. In light of these results, clear motives and an unmistakeably top-down process, collectivisation in Latvia may be rightly termed an operation undertaken by a government against its people.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The Topic of Study

Agriculture in the Soviet Union proper was collectivised in 1929-1931. Some fifteen years later, the newly annexed Baltic republics experienced analogous processes. Soviet collectivisation has been the focus of considerable research and historiographical debate, but its Baltic counterparts and their differing circumstances have been neglected in Western research.<sup>1</sup> With knowledge of the Latvian language and a keen interest in Latvian history, I hope to contribute toward remedying this.

Western research is scarce despite a new prolificacy of raw evidence on collectivisation, a phenomenon whose full implications are far from clear. Evidence on the course of collectivisation in a relatively compact and homogenous territory promises to reveal more about the underlying significance of collectivised agriculture to the centre, the cadre and the farmers – issues at the heart of historiographical debate on collectivisation.<sup>2</sup> With ten years of experience, the Soviet leadership could hardly have been unaware of the economic inferiority of Russian-style collective farming. And yet, in light of other factors, it opted to expand collectivised agriculture to new territories. These factors are the focus of this essay.

This is a study of collectivisation in occupied Latvia from 1940 to 1949 and its immediate effects. The Soviet occupation began in 1940. Within ten years, the overwhelming majority of farms had been collectivised. The results of this and Stalinist agricultural policy are evaluated using data up to 1953.<sup>3</sup> As the focus of this essay is on the benefits derived from collectivisation, the economic effects of collectivisation will be treated only to the extent that they are pertinent to this end.

The course and results of collectivisation in the “Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic” (hereafter LSSR) suggest that collectivisation was more than simply the inevitable result of Soviet doctrine. Practical concerns were of utmost importance, and the population’s economic welfare was not foremost among them. Events in Latvia reveal a carefully orchestrated process of collectivisation, and its end result, collectivised agriculture, to be vital to the functioning of the occupying totalitarian regime. They show that collectivisation was undertaken because it was essential in order to secure and maintain power, and that the hallmark of the resulting state of affairs was a successful imposition of control over the countryside.

## 1.2 Evaluation of Sources

Latvian archives were opened following restoration of independence in 1991, providing historians a wealth of raw evidence.<sup>4</sup> In the ensuing decade, several briefly

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<sup>1</sup> Bleiere, Daina. “Represijas pret zemniecību Latvijā 1944.-1953. gadā”. In *Totalitārie režīmi un to represijas Latvijā 1940-1956 gadā*, ed. Andris Caune (Rīga: Latvijas vēsturnieku komisijas apgāds, 2001) p. 590.

<sup>2</sup> See Bleiere, “Represijas pret zemniecību”, pp. 542-548.

<sup>3</sup> Because of the scarcity of data available for the late Stalin period itself, data for crop yields as late as 1956 is used.

<sup>4</sup> Central Party archives (fond 101 of the Latvian State Archives) have been opened. Alongside these (especially minutes of the Central Committee meetings, Council of Ministers meetings and Central

annotated collections of archive documents concerning collectivisation were published. Historians have researched phases and aspects of collectivisation, as well as dealt with the phenomenon in more general opera. However, there are no monographs on the subject, and analysis has not proceeded in step with the uncovering of evidence. Some research was conducted by émigrés during the years of occupation, but this was limited by inaccessibility of evidence.

One émigré source, a 1959 Ph.D. dissertation in economics by Jānis Labsvīrs, has been used extensively. The dissertation is relatively valuable as Labsvīrs, a specialist in agriculture and a firsthand witness of the first Soviet occupation, provides a broad (and the only) economic study of collectivisation in Latvia. Analyzing a contemporary process, Labsvīrs has the advantage of familiarity, yet is limited in the quantity and quality of his sources, and thus the scope of his analysis. Though Labsvīrs' work is objective and unemotive, some of his sources are inaccurate due to bias or inaccessibility of information.<sup>5</sup>

*Latvijas komunistiskās partijas vēstures apcerējumi III* (The Communist Party of Latvia's Treatises on History, Volume Three) espouses the Party's view of collectivisation to a small group of readers (only 3500 copies were printed). Though it is not fully devoid of factual information, its main value is that it provides a Soviet interpretation, which cannot avoid revealing some of the true reasons for collectivisation. Though it is obviously skewed, this Soviet source nevertheless complements the study of the background of collectivisation.

Soviet statistics were commonly, if not virtually always, inflated or outright fictitious.<sup>6</sup> Yet they are often the only data available, and as such are cited in many sources employed. As this essay is not concerned with exact economic performance, and for lack of alternative statistics, Soviet statistics will be used where they are sufficient to elucidate general trends.

A research paper by Daina Bleiere entitled *Repressions against Farmers in Latvia in 1944-1953* is the latest major contribution to the study of collectivisation in Latvia. The paper, part of the ongoing research of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia, provides a historian's valuable analysis of the process and its associated repressions in a totalitarian state. Plumbing archives and secondary sources, Bleiere does much to weave detailed and wide-ranging information into a thorough analysis. The amount of evidence to be examined is great, though, and no one historian can be expected to pronounce any immutably definitive conclusion.

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Committee Plenums), the historian interested in collectivisation in Latvia will find zonal archives useful for the micro-level evidence that they provide.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, figures given for the number deported in March 1949 are exaggerated. (Labsvīrs, Jānis. *Latvijas lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija 1944-1956* (Riga: Zinātne, 2000), p. 67, cf. Riekstiņš, Jānis. "Kulaki" Latvijā (Riga: Ievanda, 1997), p. 95.) Citing a Soviet source, Labsvīrs also gives inaccurate figures for farmers' inventory and holdings in 1945. (Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 53, cf. Strods, Heinrihs. *Latvijas lauksaimniecības vēsture* (Riga: Zvaigzne, 1992), p. 204.)

<sup>6</sup> In all fairness, it must be said that as local functionaries were not yet fully "fluent" in Soviet statistical methodology, statistics from this period tend to be more reliable than those of later years. For a discussion of this methodology, see Strods, *Lauksaimniecības vēsture*, pp. 230-234 or Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, pp. 202-204.

## 2. Aims

### 2.1 The Party against the Peasants

The clash of interests between the peasantry and the Communist Party is not unique to Latvia – it is a struggle similar to that played out in all Eastern European territories.<sup>7</sup> As others in this region, Latvia was a country of peasants, peasants attached to their land for centuries, who had only recently been endowed by the egalitarian land reform of 1920.<sup>8</sup> The urban revolutionaries' demands to socialise the precious land and regiment the lives of the stubborn and independent peasantry, urbanising the countryside in the process, were sure to provoke opposition.<sup>9</sup>

The conflict was exacerbated in Latvia for several reasons. Foremost, because farmers' resistance to becoming rural proletarians was heightened by the subsidies and eulogy that the pre-war agrarian-nationalist government had doled out to them. The rural population in many ways represented the core of the Latvian people, the incarnation of independent "bourgeois" Latvia.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Russian peasants, it was strongly individualistic; most<sup>11</sup> Latvian farmers had no tradition of *mirs*.<sup>12</sup> The immediate wave of brutality unleashed by the Soviet regime in 1940-1941 cemented resistance to it, with the result that, by 1945, the peasants and the Party could not be further apart.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.2 Ending Armed Resistance

Besides being inherently objectionable, the countryside in Latvia was the ground for extensive armed guerrilla warfare against the Soviet regime. Hardened by the horrors of the first Soviet occupation (1940-1941) and war, armed with German supplies, some twenty thousand Latvians took to the forests in 1944-1946.<sup>14</sup> Ambushing shipments and assassinating officials, these so-called forest brothers were a sharp

<sup>7</sup> Sanders, Irwin T. "Introduction". In *Collectivization of Agriculture in Eastern Europe*, ed. Irwin T. Sanders (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1958), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, pp. 25-28. The egalitarian nature of land distribution in independent pre-war Latvia is shown using Gini indices in Taagepera, Rein. "Inequality Indices for Baltic Farm Size Distribution, 1929-1940". *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1972) pp. 27-33.

<sup>9</sup> Strods, *Lauksaimniecības vēsture*, p. 227.

<sup>10</sup> The class of smallholders was created with the intention of it being a bastion of support for the parliamentary government. Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 26. Somewhat ironically, it also turned out to be bedrock of support for the authoritarian regime of Ulmanis after 1934. Swain, Geoffrey. "Deciding to Collectivise Latvian Agriculture". *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 66, No.1 (2003) p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> With the exception of those living in Latgale (Eastern Latvia), which had been a part of the predominantly Russian Vitebsk *gubern* in the tsarist empire and thus had had its agriculture more extensively Russified.

<sup>12</sup> A mir: in Russian history, a community of peasant households that elected its own officials, imposed taxes, periodically redistributed the community's land and controlled local forests, fisheries, hunting grounds, and vacant lands. It is sometimes claimed that the peasantry's longing for mirs was a factor in collectivisation in the USSR.

<sup>13</sup> Dimanta, Sindija and Zālīte, Indulis. "Četrdesmito gadu deportāciju struktūranalīze". In *Okupācijas varu nodarītie postījumi Latvijā 1940-1990*, ed. Tadeušs Puisāns (Toronto: Daugavas vanagi, 2000) p. 153. Almost a fourth of all 1941 deportees were farmers. Ibid..

<sup>14</sup> Strods, Heinrihs. "Latvijas nacionālo partizānu kaŗš." In *Okupācijas varu nodarītie postījumi Latvijā 1940-1990*, ed. Tadeušs Puisāns (Toronto: Daugavas vanagi, 2000) p. 239.

thorn in the USSR's side.<sup>15</sup> The rural population's provision of food, shelter and other supplies to these forces made asserting control over the countryside imperative for the regime.<sup>16</sup>

### 2.3 Genocide and Integration

“The nationality problem is, in its very essence, a problem of the peasantry”, wrote Stalin.<sup>17</sup> Through a mosaic of repressions against rural elements, collectivisation in Latvia was aimed at a national grouping, a captive people that resisted Soviet rule tooth and nail.<sup>18</sup> As the intelligentsia had largely already fled Latvia, the countryside remained the backbone of Latvian identity: home to most Latvians and the product of the pre-war agrarian-nationalist government's policies. It is impossible to imagine later national assimilation and colonisation without a strike at this heart of the Latvian people, conveniently masked as a “socialist transformation” of the countryside. As Stalin once proclaimed of the Soviet Union, genocide in Latvia was “socialist in form, nationalist in nature”.

As the Latvian people were integrated into an internationalist “Soviet people”, so the whole Latvian economy and territory had to be integrated into their Soviet counterparts. As the cold war escalated, the LSSR's position as the USSR's borderland made this especially important in order to increase military security.<sup>19</sup> This integration was unfathomable without the transformation of the economy according to Soviet models and the purging of unreliable elements. Collectivisation then, as the basis for subsequent ethnic engineering, industrialisation and destruction of self-sufficiency, was a way of ensuring a more homogenous Soviet Union.

### 2.4 Streamlining

A collectivised agriculture was essential for the functioning of the totalitarian regime. A tiny minority retaining its grip on power in the face of widespread passive resistance and hostility dictates the crushing of autonomous human action, to the extent that such is possible. Collectivisation was precisely this: converting the vast majority of farmers into streamlined automatons. Grain was needed; thinking was not. Indeed, the flexing of Soviet repressive muscle associated with collectivisation was streamlining in its broadest sense: the people as a whole were cowed into obedience, a population still expecting liberation was shown that the Soviets were truly in charge.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Swain, “Deciding to Collectivise”, pp. 46-49.

<sup>16</sup> Drīzulis, A. (Ed.) *Latvijas PSR vēsture: No vissenākajiem laikiem līdz mūsu dienām: 2. sējums* (Riga: Zinātne, 1986), p. 240.

<sup>17</sup> Stalin, I.V. *Works* (Moscow: 1953-5) v. 7, p. 71. Cited in Conquest, Robert. *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 219.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, large anti-Soviet forces in Courland (Western Latvia) capitulated only after Berlin was occupied. Balodis, Agnis. *Latvijas un latviešu tautas vēsture*, (Riga: Kabata, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Drīzulis, *LPSR vēsture*, p. 241. See also Swain, “Deciding to Collectivise”, p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> Swain, “Deciding to Collectivise”, p. 47. Bleiere points out that the fear created by Stalinist repressions guaranteed the more-or-less normal functioning of the regime for the next four decades. Bleiere, “Represijas pret zemniecību”, p. 540.

## **2.5 A Regime under Siege**

The new regime's power was tenuous, its existence under attack from all sides. A handful of its most important policy goals were incompatible with the continued existence of an independent rural community. The farmers had no relish for the new order, the population was so opposed to it that tens of thousands took up arms, receiving generous and widespread support. Faced with this, the regime had raw power, but no grip on the source of so many of its troubles: the Latvian countryside. Collectivisation of agriculture was the Trojan horse used to establish this grip.

### 3. Process

#### 3.1 The First Steps: 1940-1941

Soviet forces occupied Latvia in June 1940 and the USSR illegally annexed the country in August of the same year. Owing to a tense international situation and tenuous power within Latvia, the new “people’s” government declared talk of collectivisation to be “mere rumours”.<sup>21</sup> However, it launched attacks on prominent rural elements, instituting a land reform that reduced large farms to 30 ha.<sup>22</sup> Confiscated land was dealt out to landless and poor farmers and used to found sovkhoses<sup>23</sup> and horse, machine & tractor stations.<sup>24</sup> The latter took control of confiscated equipment and let it out to farmers. These were the first marks of collectivised agriculture. During this period, terror was widely employed to cleanse Latvia of “socially foreign” elements, but the countryside as such was not explicitly targeted.<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, more subtle steps were being taken to move toward collective farming. Taxes were raised and farmers were set delivery obligations of several goods.<sup>26</sup> Cooperative societies conducting parts of agricultural production collectively were seen as the first steps<sup>27</sup> to kolkhozes<sup>28</sup> and were strongly encouraged through lavish benefits.<sup>29</sup> One kolkhoz, thirty-one sovkhoses, fifty tractor stations and five hundred tractor and horse stations were created in the thirteen months before the German occupation (July 1941 – March 1944<sup>30</sup>) laying the foundations for collectivised agriculture.

#### 3.2 Recovery and Transition: 1944-1946

The Soviet Union reoccupied Latvia in March 1944-May 1945. There was, however, such recently aggravated, widespread and deep hostility to the Soviet regime that Stalin’s emissary, the CPSU<sup>31</sup> Politburo’s Bureau for Latvia, was in “no hurry” to start collectivisation.<sup>32</sup> Instead, the Soviets allowed the private sector to renew

<sup>21</sup> Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 44.

<sup>22</sup> Riekstiņš, Jānis. *Dokumenta krājums: Ekspropriācija* (Rīga: Ievanda, 1998), p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Sovkhoz, abbreviated from Russian *sovetskoe khozyaistvo*, a Soviet (i.e. state) farm that paid its workers wages.

<sup>24</sup> Translations from Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*. Henceforth referred to as “tractor stations” and “tractor and horse stations”.

<sup>25</sup> From 1941 to the end of the war, 14 428 people were deported (by the Soviets). Dimanta and Zālite, “Struktūranalīze”, p. 141. However, farmers made up a far lesser percentage of deportees in 1941 than they did in post-war deportations. *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.

<sup>26</sup> Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>27</sup> Zīle, Ļ. (Ed.) *Latvijas komunistiskās partijas vēstures apcerējumi III* (Rīga: Avots, 1981), p. 287.

<sup>28</sup> Kolkhoz, abbreviated from the Russian *kollektivnoe khozyaistvo*, a collective farm. All references to kolkhozes in this essay are to the collective farms of the *artel* type, in which means of production were socialised along with most land, but farmers were left small (0.25-0.5ha) individual plots of land.

<sup>29</sup> This involved granting extra land, credits, use of tractor stations, lower taxes and obligations as well as cheaper goods to cooperative and collective farmers. Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> Courland (Western Latvia) was only reoccupied in May, 1945.

<sup>31</sup> Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

<sup>32</sup> Swain, “Deciding to Collectivise”, p. 46. The regime’s power was very tenacious – it only felt secure enough to hold any elections in 1946. Misiunas and Taagepera, *Years of Dependence*, p. 76.

Latvia's war-torn agriculture, much as NEP<sup>33</sup> had in the USSR. Despite the heavy weight of taxes and obligations, Latvian farmers started to make a remarkably swift recovery. Thus, 1944-1945 saw a fifty-two percent increase in horse population, a seventy-seven percent increase in cattle population, a tripling of potato yield per hectare and almost all pre-war land brought back under cultivation.<sup>34</sup> This was in contrast to the functioning of sovkhozes, which had poorer efficiency, lower incomes and a substandard meeting of obligatory deliveries to the state.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, it became increasingly clear that private farming was transitional in nature. A second land reform in 1944-1945 further reduced large plots of land, again attempting to split the farmers and weaken opposition.<sup>36</sup> In fact, sixty-four percent of land appropriated in this second land reform was openly taken for political reasons.<sup>37</sup> Taxes and obligations were increased to a level that made them unbearable for most farmsteads.<sup>38</sup> From 1946-1947, around seventy percent of farmers were herded into cooperative societies,<sup>39</sup> which were incorporated into a Union of Cooperatives under government control.<sup>40</sup> Through this, in conjunction with multiplying tractor stations, farmers were brought into Party supervision. The tractor stations liberally served out propaganda,<sup>41</sup> and together with generously equipped sovkhozes, attempted to demonstrate the "advantages" of mechanisation and collective farming.<sup>42</sup>

These attempts to "persuade" farmers to collectivise met with failure. By the beginning of 1947, there were only four kolkhozes, farming 2.4% of arable land.<sup>43</sup> Yet the Party had begun to infiltrate the countryside. Alongside the expansion of infrastructure of control, the cadre grew rapidly during this period,<sup>44</sup> opening the way for the next phase of action.

### 3.3 Crackdown: 1947-1948

When the economy had recovered enough to withstand the disruption and damage that collectivisation would cause,<sup>45</sup> Moscow began to phase out individual farming. The CPSU Central Committee ordered the setting up of the first model kolkhozes in May,<sup>46</sup> and, from the second half of 1947, pressure on Latvia's farmers started mounting. Following a signed order from Stalin, special lists of all so-called "kulaks" in the LSSR were drawn up.<sup>47</sup> Those blacklisted had their taxable income multiplied

<sup>33</sup> The New Economic Policy, a temporary retreat from doctrinaire communism and centralization from 1921 to 1928 in the Soviet Union.

<sup>34</sup> Strods, *Lauksaimniecības vēsture*, p. 210.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>36</sup> Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 51.

<sup>37</sup> Strods, *Lauksaimniecības vēsture*, p. 203.

<sup>38</sup> Bleiere, "Represijas pret zemniecību", p. 558.

<sup>39</sup> Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 55.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>41</sup> Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 59.

<sup>42</sup> Zīle, *LKP vēstures apcerējumi*, pp. 290, 292.

<sup>43</sup> Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> Zīle, *LKP vēstures apcerējumi*, p. 298.

<sup>45</sup> Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> Drīzulis, *LPSR vēsture*, p. 236.

<sup>47</sup> A Latvian Communist Party Central Committee stenograph refers to "the decision of the Council of Ministers, signed by comrade Stalin [...]". Minutes of the 29 August 1947 meeting of the Latvian Communist (Bolshevik) Party on the definition of "kulak" farmsteads. Latvian State Archives, Party

by 1.5, 1.75 or two.<sup>48</sup> Two perfunctory meetings of high-level cadre were held by the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party in order to define what constituted a “kulak”,<sup>49</sup> but in effect, the Ministry of Finance drew up its own definitions.<sup>50</sup> This “kulak” blacklisting was of incredible political gravity,<sup>51</sup> and the centre tirelessly intervened to ensure a tough line.<sup>52</sup> The average farmstead paid 1.7 times more in taxes in 1947 than in 1946, while the average “kulak” farmstead paid fivefold the previous year’s taxes.<sup>53</sup>

Throughout 1948, many a “kulak” was unable to pay his taxes as a result of these astronomical rates. They were prosecuted, their property confiscated, their families thrown out of their homes.<sup>54</sup> Relinquishing one’s land to escape financial ruin was not allowed;<sup>55</sup> those unable to sow all of their land were accused of sabotage.<sup>56</sup> More and more “kulaks” were disenfranchised, and as they were not allowed into kolkhozes,<sup>57</sup> the “kulaks” no longer had any possible place in the Latvian countryside.

This provided for a massive expropriation of wealth. Farmers were milked by the massive and constant increases in taxes<sup>58</sup> compounded by obligatory deliveries,<sup>59</sup> requisitioning by the Red Army,<sup>60</sup> forced road and forestry labour<sup>61</sup> and a disproportional rise in the price of industrial goods.<sup>62</sup> The combined result was especially convenient: as the hostile farmers were bled dry of their wealth, it was absorbed by a cash-strapped government (“internal accumulation of capital”<sup>63</sup>). This further explains the restrictions on “kulaks” joining kolkhozes and the heretofore

Archives, fond 101, opis 10, delo 82, pp. 63-68. In Riekstiņš, “*Kulaki*” *Latvijā*, p. 21. Henceforth cited as LSA PA 101.10.82.63-68.

<sup>48</sup> Riekstiņš, Jānis. “Nodokļu nasta – latviešu zemnieku izputināšanas līdzeklis”. *Latvijas Arhīvi*, No. 2 (1998) p. 52.

<sup>49</sup> LSA PA 101.10.82.63-68. In Riekstiņš, “*Kulaki*” *Latvijā*, p. 22.

<sup>50</sup> Riekstiņš, “*Kulaki*” *Latvijā*, p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> LSA PA 101.10.82.63-68. In Riekstiņš, “*Kulaki*” *Latvijā*, p. 20.

<sup>52</sup> Extract from the minutes of the LSSR republic-wide meeting of finance functionaries. 10 October 1947. LSA 327.7.100.130-132, 134, 137-138, 141. In Riekstiņš, “*Kulaki*” *Latvijā*, p. 73.

Report of F. Manoilo, LSSR Deputy Minister for Finance, concerning the removal of farmsteads from “kulak” blacklists. 16 March 1948. LSA 327.7.154.165. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

Extract from the minutes of the XXII Plenum of the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist (Bolshevik) Party. 11 January 1949. LSA PA 101.12.8.1-3. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>53</sup> Bleire, “Represijas pret zemniecību”, p. 559.

<sup>54</sup> Report of the LSSR Council of Ministers’ plenipotentiary J. Dīmanis to Secretary of the Central Committee I. Ļebedev concerning the ruin of “kulak” farmsteads in the district of Valka. 5 October 1948. LSA PA 101.11.73.117. In Riekstiņš, “*Kulaki*” *Latvijā*, p. 84-85. Taxes were purposely set above the “kulaks” ability to pay. *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> LSA PA 101.10.82.59-62. In Riekstiņš, “*Kulaki*” *Latvijā*, p. 56.

<sup>56</sup> Swain, “Deciding to Collectivise”, p. 45.

<sup>57</sup> Riekstiņš, “*Kulaki*” *Latvijā*, p. 91.

<sup>58</sup> Bleiere, “Represijas pret zemniecību”, p. 559 and Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 61.

<sup>59</sup> Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 61. These sometimes had to be transported by the farmer as far as 50 kilometers. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>60</sup> Strods, *Lauksaimniecības vēsture*, p. 207.

<sup>61</sup> Extract from the speech of A. Vējš, Chairman of the Village Soviet of Dobele, at the timber procurement meeting of front-rank peasants of the LSSR. 15 June 1947. LSA 611.3.729.73. In Riekstiņš, Jānis. (Ed.) *Represijas Latvijas laukos 1944-1949: Dokumenti un materiāli*, (Riga: Latvian State Archives, 2000), p. 117. For a case study, see Opoļska, Anda. “Represijas pret Cēsu apriņķa lauku iedzīvotājiem 1944.-1949. gadā”. *Latvijas Arhīvi*, No. 1 (2001), pp. 75-77.

<sup>62</sup> Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 42.

<sup>63</sup> Bleiere, “Represijas pret zemniecību”, p. 540.

tentative pace of founding kolkhozes:<sup>64</sup> the regime would not allow anyone to escape total expropriation.

The use of these financial and economic repressions was extensive. In scope, repressions through taxation, obligatory deliveries and forced labour far surpassed direct repressions such as deportations.<sup>65</sup> When indebted farmers no longer had any property remaining to cede in lieu of taxes, they were brought to court and imprisoned.<sup>66</sup> This heavy reliance upon economic and financial repressions resulted in a smoothly proceeding process that avoided excessive destruction and turmoil, battering the countryside until it was ready to be knocked over by a wave of collectivisation.

### 3.4 The Great Breakthrough: 1949

In 1949, the Central Committee of the CPSU declared conditions in Latvia and other recently annexed territories ripe for a wave of collectivisation.<sup>67</sup> Accusations against “hostile elements” became ever shriller and actions against “kulaks” were stepped up.<sup>68</sup> In January, Stalin decided on mass deportations.<sup>69</sup> In March, the LSSR Council of Ministers approved a resolution deporting ten thousand “kulak” families from Latvia.<sup>70</sup> Only eight days later, the corresponding 29 252 men, women and children were “liquidated as a class”.<sup>71</sup> 72.9% of March 1949 deportees were women and children; their fathers, sons and husbands the most active members of rural society.<sup>72</sup> The Latvian people were dealt a blow of genocide, the rural community was decapitated.

The mass deportation had its intended effect: farmers were rushing to form kolkhozes even as their neighbours were being packed into cattle-wagons. In the ten-day interval of March 26 – April 6 alone, 1740 new kolkhozes were founded.<sup>73</sup> By the end of 1949, 4103 kolkhozes existed, encompassing eighty-five percent of farms.<sup>74</sup> The Kremlin had collectivised Latvia in half the time it took in the “older republics”, simultaneously removing those who might come to threaten the approaching Soviet order.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 190.

<sup>65</sup> Bleiere, “Represijas pret zemniecību”, p. 541. Of those prosecuted, the vast majority were accused of economic crimes rather than outright political offenses. *Ibid.*, p. 566.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 573.

<sup>67</sup> Riekstiņš, “Kulaki” *Latvijā*, p. 93.

<sup>68</sup> Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>69</sup> Swain, “Deciding to Collectivise”, p. 55.

<sup>70</sup> Riekstiņš, “Kulaki” *Latvijā*, p. 94.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Strods, Heinrihs. “PSRS Valsts Drošības ministrijas pilnīgi slepenā Baltijas valstu iedzīvotāju izsūtīšanas operācija “Krusta Banga” (“Priboj”)”. In *Latvijas Okupācijas muzeja gadagrāmata 1999*, eds. V. Nollendorfs, R. Pētersons, M. Kotts (Rīga: Latvijas 50 gadu okupācijas muzeja fonds, 2000), p. 178.

<sup>73</sup> Riekstiņš, “Kulaki” *Latvijā*, p. 95.

<sup>74</sup> Strods, *Lauksaimniecības vēsture*, p. 223.

<sup>75</sup> Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 68. Apparently considering collectivisation in Latvia to have started in earnest after the Second World War, and dating the beginning of collectivisation in the Soviet Union proper to the days of War Communism.

## 4. The Aftermath

### 4.1 Post-Collectivisation Agricultural Policy and Rural Order

The regime presided over reductions in factors of production during the first years of collectivised agriculture. For instance, while Eastern Latvia was suffering from an acute shortage of livestock, 2340 animals were actually exported from the LSSR.<sup>76</sup> The supply of labour in particular was constricted. A rural economy already suffering from a shortage of labour<sup>77</sup> was faced with the artificial diversion of labour to urban areas, and to serve the needs of the Party and Red Army.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the shortage became so acute that the regime bound kolkhoz workers to their kolkhozes – those attempting to leave were punishable as “deserters”.<sup>79</sup> The kolkhoz directors and Soviet “specialists” that replaced the bourgeois specialists that the regime elected not to employ were glaringly uneducated.<sup>80</sup> The absolute majority of kolkhoz directors had a six-class primary school education; less than two percent were agronomists.<sup>81</sup> Lamely, the Party later admitted to “having shown little help” towards kolkhozes.<sup>82</sup>

In testimony to the gravity of rural economic concerns as such, the leadership largely ignored the countryside after collectivisation.<sup>83</sup> Agriculture dilapidated because of wanton interest and concern: even the Council of Ministers had to admit in 1953 that it “truly does not at all know [...] why many kolkhozes are so backward.”<sup>84</sup> At every step below itself, it found “indecisive and careless” leadership, leading to a dismal situation.<sup>85</sup> Tractor station leaders, often ignorant of Latvian, failed to communicate with kolkhozes.<sup>86</sup> District and kolkhoz leaderships, in turn, did not communicate with kolkhoz workers, regularly administering through repressions and intimidation.<sup>87</sup> Characterizing the functioning of kolkhozes to a secret Party Plenum in 1953, First Secretary Jānis Kalnbērziņš read aloud the following passage of a letter from a kolkhoz worker:

<sup>76</sup> Strods, *Lauksaimniecības vēsture*, p. 225.

<sup>77</sup> Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 67.

<sup>78</sup> Strods, *Lauksaimniecības vēsture*, p. 227.

<sup>79</sup> Report of A. Košeļev, LSSR Deputy Minister of the Interior, concerning the migration of rural inhabitants to Riga and other cities. 25 June 1949. LSA, 270.s439.1.157. In Pelkaus, Elmārs. (Ed.) *Okupācijas varu politika Latvijā 1939-1990: Dokumentu krājums* (Riga: Latvian State Archives, 1999), p. 338.

Extract from the speech of J. Kalnbērziņš, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party, at the Riga district kolkhoz directors' conference on work discipline in kolkhozes. LSA 611.3.146.27. 16 October 1950. *Ibid.*, p. 339.

Report of V. Kubrakov, head of the Agricultural Group of the LSSR Council of Ministers' Office for Affairs, concerning the unprompted movement of kolkhoz workers from their kolkhozes. 8 June 1954. LSA 270.2.5414. *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>80</sup> Minutes of the 22-23 June 1953 Plenum of the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party. LSA PA 101.16.9.102.

<sup>81</sup> *Zīle, LKP vēstures apcerējumi*, p. 309. Popular legend has it that Soviet “specialists” could not tell wheat from rye.

<sup>82</sup> LSA PA 101.16.9.80-81.

<sup>83</sup> This point is also made in Misiunas and Taagepera, *Years of Dependence*, p. 104.

<sup>84</sup> LSA PA 101.16.9.81.

<sup>85</sup> LSA PA 101.16.9.82.

<sup>86</sup> LSA PA 101.16.9.84.

<sup>87</sup> LSA PA 101.16.9.84-85.

Our kolkhoz is characterized by boozing and theft. This is what the director and brigadier concern themselves with. Whoever drinks with them can do whatever he wants. They do with the kolkhoz according to their whims; an honest kolkhoz worker can not survive.<sup>88</sup>

Somberly, Kalnbērziņš added that the letter was only one of “very, very many”.<sup>89</sup>

## 4.2 The Degradation of the Countryside

The economic results of collectivisation were disastrous: compared to pre-war levels, production contracted sharply and broadly. In 1953, only eighty percent of pre-war land was under cultivation,<sup>90</sup> with wheat production anywhere from forty-four to seventy-nine percent lower.<sup>91</sup> In comparison to 1938-1939, by 1956 there was an average decrease of thirty-seven percent in livestock and a total milk yield decrease of some fifty-four percent.<sup>92</sup> An official Soviet report found that, on average, almost sixty-four percent of kolkhoz land was overgrown with weeds.<sup>93</sup> Reduced output necessarily meant dwindling welfare. Yet this does not capture the full scope of the degradation of the rural population.

The standard of living in the countryside fell precipitously. As soon as farmers had been forced into kolkhozes, relief to collective farming was reversed. Thus, the average amount paid by a kolkhoz worker in taxes increased more than sixfold from 1949 to 1952, to which must be added substantial obligatory deliveries and compulsory buying of state bonds.<sup>94</sup> During the same interval, pay per day in money decreased by forty-three percent, while payment in grain dropped by sixty-five percent.<sup>95</sup> Kolkhoz workers were paid for their produce according to 1928-1929 prices,<sup>96</sup> making purchase of even clothes or footwear unheard-of.<sup>97</sup> A diet once heavy with meat, milk and eggs was replaced by one based on grain and its derivatives.<sup>98</sup> Housing was scant and shoddy: one high-ranking LSSR official remarked that kolkhoz workers had less living space than the cows they milked.<sup>99</sup>

Moral degradation went hand in hand with material degradation: the underlying culture of the Latvian protestant farming community was smashed. The new system, in which farmers were grouped into alien Russian *mir*-style rural villages,<sup>100</sup>

<sup>88</sup> LSA PA 101.16.9.85.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>90</sup> LSA PA 101.16.9.80.

<sup>91</sup> Averages of 1937-1939 and 1951, 1952, 1954. Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 144.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 145-146.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>94</sup> Bleiere, “Represijas pret zemniecību”, p. 561.

<sup>95</sup> LSA PA 101.16.91.81.

<sup>96</sup> Bleiere, “Represijas pret zemniecību”, p. 562.

<sup>97</sup> According to the United States Congress Select Committee to investigate the incorporation of the Baltic States into the USSR, they had to resort to fashioning their clothes out of rags and footwear out of old tires. Cited in Labsvīrs, *Lauksaimniecības kolektivizācija*, p. 152. Admittedly, the Select Committee may be somewhat biased. Nevertheless, other evidence seems to corroborate this point. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>100</sup> Information from the LSSR Council of Ministers concerning the preparation of documents to move kolkhoz workers from individual farms to villages. 6 January 1951. LSA 270.2.5323.1. In Riekstiņš, Jānis. *No viensētām – uz sociālistiskajiem ciematiem*. [http://vip.latnet.lv/LPRA/no\\_viensetam.htm](http://vip.latnet.lv/LPRA/no_viensetam.htm) (Accessed 7 June 2003).

encouraged servility, slacking and informing on others instead of work.<sup>101</sup> These changes were speeded by the removal of the rural populace's moral authority, the "kulaks".<sup>102</sup> Soviet policy also entailed transplanting farmers to distant regions within Latvia,<sup>103</sup> breaking the bonds to one's land<sup>104</sup> that underlie the peasant lifestyle and ethos.

### 4.3 Power Secured

Alongside "kulaks", 12 881 "bandits" (partisans), "nationalists" and family members thereof were deported in March 1949.<sup>105</sup> This and taking control of resources were the decisive blows against the partisan movement: from 1950, it started to fizzle out.<sup>106</sup> The system then established, borne of the rural destruction and decline, was an apparatus finally extending the Party's tentacles to the countryside. From 1950 to 1953, there was a forty percent increase in the amount of communists in kolkhozes,<sup>107</sup> two thirds of which had their own Party organisations.<sup>108</sup> Through these and over thirty thousand agitators in the countryside, the Party was able to "educate" the young and the old alike, enforcing "discipline" and "competition".<sup>109</sup>

Kolkhoz workers nominally elected their leadership. Yet the Party had exclusive control over the supply of this leadership: it alone could provide specialists and specially groomed kolkhoz leaders.<sup>110</sup> It was energetic in enforcing this control – in 1952, for example, nearly one-third of kolkhoz leaders were replaced.<sup>111</sup> In addition, kolkhozes were fully dependent on tractor stations, which were equipped with new special political departments to oversee kolkhoz activities.<sup>112</sup> The Party now had virtually all of the farmer's life before its eyes and in its grip.

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<sup>101</sup> Bleiere, "Represijas pret zemniecību", p. 579.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid..

<sup>103</sup> Extract from the explanation of the Relocation Commission of the LSSR Ministry of Agriculture concerning the procedure of relocation. Undated. LSA 270.2.5095.55. In Riekstiņš, *No viensētām*.

<sup>104</sup> Pelkaus, "Okupācijas varu politika Latvijā", p. 325.

<sup>105</sup> Riekstiņš, "Kulaki" Latvijā, p. 95.

<sup>106</sup> Misiunas and Taagepera, *Years of Dependence*, p. 93.

<sup>107</sup> Zīle, *LKP vēstures apcerējumi*, p. 310.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., pp. 310-311.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., pp. 256, 311.

<sup>110</sup> Zīle, *LKP vēstures apcerējumi*, p. 309.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 309.

<sup>112</sup> Drīzulis, *LPSR vēsture*, p. 243.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 The Meaning of Collectivisation

Collectivisation was the imposition of Party hegemony upon the countryside. The Soviet regime could not be secure in Latvia as long as this independent countryside – with its peripheries of guerrilla warfare, autonomous and uncentralized action and the Latvian bourgeois spirit – continued to exist and control resources. The Soviet solution was to destroy the farmers, some physically and the remainder as a socio-economic class. Through the process of collectivisation and the resulting degradation of the countryside, the regime swept away active resistance and shattered the bedrock of the Latvian people.

These were the threats that the Soviet Union considered great enough to balance the economic disaster of collectivisation in Latvia. Through collectivisation, the Soviets finally gained control of the greater part of the LSSR's population, the freedom to confiscate its property through the transitional phase and to exploit its work through the kolkhoz system. The regime also extended its control to all foodstuffs. These were the benefits that effectively nullified the outcomes of less work and reduced production.

Collectivisation in Latvia does much to bolster the traditional totalitarian paradigm of Soviet historiography. Unmistakeably, power accruing to the centre, to Moscow, was the main benefit derived from this otherwise destructive process. Further, it is crystal-clear that this process was conceived, planned and instituted in the absence of any relevant social forces and by the centre: laying the foundations in 1941-1941, holding back in 1944-1946, cracking down in 1947, lashing out in 1949 can all be traced directly to the USSR leadership. From district officials to the Latvian Communist Party's Central Committee, local functionaries were little more than the executioners of the centre's will. Collectivisation was the Sovietization of a province, the stabilisation of a realm – an operation carried out against the population as a whole by a highly honed and centralized regime of repression.

### 5.2 Final Thoughts

Generalisations about Soviet collectivisation on the basis of events in Latvia should be made cautiously. Collectivisation in the USSR happened at a different stage of development, both of agriculture and of the totalitarian regime, and in a profoundly different culture. But the Stalinist relationship between the government and the governed should be similar. This study supports the view that this relationship was of a state unremittingly fighting its people.<sup>113</sup>

Further evidence for this is to be found in the centre, Moscow. Minutes of the CPSU Central Committee, the USSR Council of Ministers and correspondence of the Bureau for Latvia should more precisely reveal the development of the collectivisation

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<sup>113</sup> A view expressed, for instance, in Werth, Nicolas. "A State against Its People: Violence, Repression, and Terror in the Soviet Union". In *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, Stéphane Courtois et al. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999) pp. 33-268.

process and the short-run reasons thereof. Many of the results of collectivisation touched upon here also deserve more attention. For instance, more specific and numerical evidence of the decline in the rural standard of living is needed, as is study of the longer-term degradation of the rural population and its culture through collectivisation.

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