

Conclusion

THE PRACTICE AND PROBLEMS OF AGRICULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE GDR

After the ‘Socialist Spring’ of 1960 the conditions of agricultural production and, with them, the whole nature of rural society in the GDR began to undergo a new stage of radical transformation. This book has sought to clarify the terms on which this transformation took place, highlighting the complexity of authority as social practice in the rural and agricultural context.

By offering farmers and agricultural workers various forms of economic incentive to join or form an LPG and by gradually restricting the profits of independent farmers, the SED leadership had had only limited success during the 1950s in changing the pattern of farming, property ownership and social relations in the countryside – particularly in the south of the GDR where the postwar land reforms had not caused widespread upheaval. By 1958 there remained massive hostility to any notion of abandoning private independent farming in the countryside, and considerable, if less overt, antipathy towards the SED regime in general. Under these circumstances, the SED leadership chose to adopt a more aggressive approach to the transformation of the countryside, beginning to step up the pressure on farmers to agree to collectivise.

The purposes behind the pursuit of collectivisation were fairly straightforward. It promised greater administrative influence by representatives of the state over the methods and processes of food production and would thus, in theory at least, allow stable and systematic increases in productivity to occur across the GDR. It was integral to the pursuit of the SED’s ideological agenda, undermining the role of private property as a determinant of social status. No less importantly, it provided the means by which the SED regime could control and limit the local influence of all those it perceived to be hostile or obstructive to its political authority. By the same token, the SED would cease to be a marginal force in rural communities. The network of loyal local representatives of the regime and the broader participation of the farming population in the new hierarchy of authority established in the wake of collectivisation.

sation would, it was intended, ensure the ruling party a permanent and integral presence in rural life.

By 1960, the lack of progress in persuading farmers to form agricultural collectives remained, however, a serious concern for the SED leadership, leading to a decision to initiate intensified agitation campaigns in villages around the GDR, aiming for the rapid completion of full collectivisation. Above all, during March and April 1960, using increasingly heavy-handed intimidation to break down resistance, brigades of agitators succeeded in forcing large numbers of independent farmers to sign up to what was still supposedly a voluntary collectivisation. This was, however, merely the beginning of a gradual process. Not least, given the acrimonious and often inconsistent nature of the collectivisation campaign and the uncertainty of the international political situation in 1960 and 1961, agriculture and rural society in the GDR remained divided and destabilised by conflict over the coming years.

With a micro analysis of the processes of communication and policy implementation in Bezirk Erfurt, this book has attempted to show up in detail how the agricultural administration functioned at the grass roots over the following decades. In so doing it has sought to highlight the complexity and variation, even within a confined area, of the manner and consequences of the SED's transformation of agricultural organisation on the ground, not apparent in other accounts of this period.¹ Using documents referring to regional and local circumstances from a range of sources, it has been possible to build up a picture of the conflicts and compromises which took place at the front line of agricultural production at various stages during the GDR's existence. With this picture, some light has been shed on the range of factors contributing to a stabilisation of SED authority in the GDR. In rural communities force and fear was but one element driving the process of consolidation of the LPGs, alongside farmers' and rural functionaries' own motives for compromise and participation in the day-to-day development of new structures of agricultural organisation.

With the building of the Wall in August 1961, the SED leadership was certainly in a better position to drive forward social and economic transformation in the countryside under the terms of a specifically 'socialist' modernisation of farming. The conditions of collectivised agriculture, it was argued, would allow the development and funding of new technology and implementation of modern methods to be better managed. It would become possible to increase the productivity of domestic agriculture in predictable and plan-able ways. Under SED guidance the private, small-scale and traditional means of agricultural production were to become progressively more collective, large-scale and indus-

trial. Achieving these aims in practice was by no means straightforward given the deficit of ideological support for the SED in the countryside and the hostility to state interference among farmers, even once collective farms in general began to achieve some economic stability and grow in stature and permanence as institutions.

What was seen as unnecessary bureaucratisation of the management of collective farms continued to be met with considerable hostility in both Type I and Type III LPGs. District state authorities' demands for quantifiable data on all aspects of the production process were recognised by farmers as a means to exploit their labour and property more efficiently. Attempts to introduce competition between LPG members and accounting regulations designed to quantify waste or inefficiency more precisely appeared to many as little more than tools of administrative control. Meanwhile, the threat to self-determination of finances in each LPG posed by attempts to expand the scale of farming through 'cooperation' roused no less opposition.

The extent to which collective farmers themselves received and understood SED policy and were willing to participate in its implementation did grow during the course of the 1960s. The growing membership of the SED in rural communities, the increasing qualification levels and the material benefits of collective farming had begun to alter the terms of the relationship between farmers and the SED leadership. However, the efficiency with which policy was communicated and with which the authority of the SED was asserted on a day-to-day basis was by no means consistent. The low-level functionaries of party and state operating in rural areas and the managers of the collective farms themselves had a variety of relationships with one another and with LPG members at large which complicated the processes of policy implementation. This situation was made still more complex by the lack of consensus on the proper course of agricultural development and personal and local rivalries amongst farmers and agricultural functionaries, as well as worsening economic shortages. It was in this context that confusion arose in agricultural administration at the end of the Ulbricht era, as the forced evolution of the scale and organisation of collective farming gave way to administrative gridlock and newly virulent assertions of the right to local self-determination by collective farmers and LPG managers.

Despite this period of confusion and economic frailty, the circumstances in which the SED leadership was able to exert its authority over collective farmers were continuing to shift. The proportion of active collective farmers with a tradition of hostility to SED agricultural policy had begun to diminish rapidly. Consistent economic pressure

was forcing increasing numbers of LPG Type I members – the most reluctant participants in collectivised farming – to retire from agriculture and/or relinquish their livestock to collective control and their land for use in cooperation with other LPGs. Moreover, new generations of professional, specialist collective farmers and agricultural technicians with ‘socialist’ education and career backgrounds were beginning to take up key positions in the LPGs. Thus it was not long after the VIII SED Party Congress that real progress began to be made in the radical reorganisation of farming on the ground. Now, those functionaries in the party and state administration concerned with rural affairs and in individual LPGs were acting with renewed confidence in the clear direction of agricultural development to arrange the new cooperative crop production units.

Increasingly, LPG members accepted that traditional mixed farms would be broken up into specialised crop and livestock units and expanded separately. In the process, collective farmers would still have to accept often unwelcome changes to their status and the conditions of their labour, not least losing direct claim or connection to the land and livestock of the LPG while having to accept the future disjunction of work from home life. At the same time, however, dismay at these changes and doubts as to the viability of such a specialisation, that is of such a departure from tradition, were offset by renewed state investment in agriculture which promised to bring some immediate improvements to working and living conditions in rural communities. New machinery and new facilities promised to improve productivity, wages were going up and so, it seemed, were living standards as the benefits of Honecker’s commitment to consumerist and welfare policies benefited villagers, along with the rest of the population.

By the mid-1970s – a decade and a half after the Socialist Spring – a number of fundamental changes had taken place. Separate administrations ran crop and livestock farming. Huge expanses were now devoted to single crops and could be farmed by specially designed machines. Thousands of animals were being farmed on single sites. Almost all aspects of food production were now firmly tied into and controlled within the planned economy. Almost all the GDR’s (now reduced) agricultural workforce had received some formal vocational qualification and begun to specialise in a particular branch of production. SED members dominated the top management positions in the collective farms, and were backed by better-organised SED party organisations. Moreover, the prospects for further improvement to productivity were far from exhausted. Mechanised and intensive farming methods promised to become both more productive and more consistent.

However, as the economic climate in the GDR as a whole began to deteriorate, agriculture in particular was faced by unsustainable rises in production costs. Ironically, these were problems that the new structures of organisation tended to some extent to exacerbate. Crop production was now so structured towards the use of labour-saving, high-intensity methods and on such a large scale with a finely balanced system of agro-technical deadlines, that coping with cuts to fuel, fertiliser and machinery threatened to undermine the economies of scale. At the same time, livestock production was increasingly dependent on energy to run intensive production plants, as well as on fuel for efficient transport of feed as well as animals. The consolidation of industrial-style agriculture during the late 1970s occurred at the same time as a number of factors converged to undermine the strength of the East German economy and deprive industrialised agriculture of the necessary inputs in order to make it efficient. Rising prices on the world markets and cuts to financial and material support coming from the Soviet Union led to shortages of fuel and fertiliser. Moreover, the GDR's national debt had risen exponentially during the 1970s, with the result that there were limits on the amount of Western currency which could be spent on imports, particularly of necessary feed supplies, while machinery manufactured in the GDR was necessarily being made available for export despite an unsatisfied demand at home.²

After the conflicts of the previous decade, the structures of SED authority in agriculture and, thus, in rural society more generally, had effectively stabilised. Yet almost simultaneously, economic stagnation and decline had begun to establish the bases for renewed material dissatisfaction among sections of the rural population. A tighter prioritisation of resources at all levels led inevitably to some casualties of administrative rationalisation, resulting in increasing differentiation in living and working conditions between LPGs and rural communities.³ In these circumstances agricultural production appeared to be becoming less rather than more efficient.⁴ By the mid-1980s the negative effects on living and working conditions in rural communities of the policy of gigantism in agriculture were exacerbated by the inefficiencies of the planned economy. Shortages of essential materials and fuel as well as the environmental impact of industrialised agriculture undermined the advantages of the SED's radical transformative social and economic policies in the countryside.

Amid much conflict and compromise a limited social and economic transformation of the conditions of agricultural production developed following the completion of full collectivisation, transforming the context in which the SED leadership sought to assert its authority over

agricultural production and rural society. Ultimately, however, the reconfiguration of the administration of agriculture at the grass roots proved unable to prevent – indeed arguably exacerbated – the problems of production. By 1989, the concomitant disparities and hardship faced by those living and working in rural communities could but undermine further the SED leadership's claims to legitimacy, based as it was on a commitment to equality and material progress.

Notes

1. D. Gabler, *Entwicklungsabschnitte der Landwirtschaft in der ehemaligen DDR*, Berlin, 1995. This account of agricultural development in Bezirk Erfurt in various periods from the 1950s to 1989, though detailed in its survey of the various structures of collectivised and industrialised agriculture, makes only very limited use of the available sources, tending to provide a superficial account of the practice of policy implementation.
2. SAPMO BArch IV/B 2/2.023/2 Büro Gerhard Grüneberg, ZK der SED Abt. Landwirtschaft an Honecker, Entwicklungsprobleme der Landwirtschaft bei der weiteren Durchführung der Beschlüsse des VIII. und IX. Parteitag, 31.10.1979.
3. SAPMO BArch IV/B 2/2.023/61 Komitee der ABI, Information über Kontrollergebnisse zur Entwicklung der Tierverluste in der Rinder- und Schweinehaltung, 21.11.1978; DY30/1512 ZK der SED Abt. Landwirtschaft, Standpunkt zu den neuen Forderungen der staatlichen Plankommission, 8.9.1981, p. 299.
4. SAPMO BArch DY30/1541 ZK der SED Abt. Landwirtschaft, Tendenzen, Ergebnisse und Schlussfolgerungen aus den 7 Bezirksanalysen, 24.4.1979, pp. 33–56.