Peasant leaders in interbellum Europe

People in most places have long had the goal of owning their own piece of land to farm, so that they could feed their families and lift themselves out of poverty. Historically, the farming of private land has also been the means of giving peasants the right to participate in civic life and be considered full-fledged citizens. Demands for land have often been asserted by rural populations in connection with radical social transformations, and have then served as the message around which an agrarian movement has consolidated. Such movements are currently in evidence among peasant workers, particularly in Mexico, India and South Africa, but the notion of the farmer as the backbone of society has been espoused by politicians as diverse as Thomas Jefferson and Hugo Chávez.

Even though agrarian forces have had only marginal political influence in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region over the last two decades, agrarian parties and movements did play a decisive role in the political developments in these regions in the early 1900s. Ideologically unfeathered and rooted in real-politik, they were able to forge alliances on both the right and the left and, by their actions, overthrow or bolster the prevailing political powers. The peasants also made up the majority of the population in many of these countries following World War I, enabling the agrarian parties to easily amass large blocs of voters.

In contrast to the West European and Scandinavian agrarian parties, which were usually politicized producers’ organizations, most of the parties in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region grew into social reform movements that opposed the structure of the old civil society and viewed land reforms as their primary objective. The agrarian parties favored a loose assemblage of ideologies grounded in the family and in the values of the agricultural society, and they sought to modernize society based on the needs of the peasants. They wanted to offer a third way in the political arena, that is, between the market liberals, who were thought to care only about economic values and to be neglectful of the essential features of agrarian life, and the socialists, whose plans to collectivize the land were viewed as a threat to peasant freedom. With a mixture of individualism and collectivism, they forged an economic poli-
the turn of the century in 1900. Croatia belonged to the Hungarian part of the dual monarchy, and Biondich touches upon Hungarian chauvinism and the tax burdens imposed on the peasants. As one of the founders of the party, Radić worked methodically to convince and win over the often illiterate peasants in the villages and build a mass movement. Grassroots initiatives and resistance to the Hungarian authorities resulted in the peasants aligning themselves heavily with the agrarian party once they were given the right to vote. Prior to 1918, Radić had eagerly supported the notion of a shared Serbian and Croatian culture as a counterweight to the Hungarians, but after 1918 his distrust was instead redirected against the Serbian rulers in Belgrade and the new Yugoslavian federation. Despite his distrust of Serbs, Radić always championed the rights of Serbs living in Croatia, and staunchly opposed the use of conquest and violence to advance the Croatian cause. Radić’s Pan-Slavism cooled after the Russian Revolution, which he viewed as a political mistake and a threat to the peasantry.

The land reforms implemented in Yugoslavia after World War I never attained any pervasive social significance; access to land was too limited for that to happen. The agrarian party’s key issue during the interbellum period thus shifted from the future of agriculture to the future of the Croatian people. If the party was skeptical of the urban population at the start of the interbellum period, that skepticism faded with the advent of nationalism. The party equated the Croatian spirit with peasant culture, out of which everything truly Croatian had grown. Political acrimony was often directed against Jews as the primary representatives of capitalism and urban decadence.

**UNFORTUNATELY**, Radić vanishes more and more as a person in the chapters in which we follow him into Yugoslavian national politics. The book transitions from biography to political history, but without bringing the entire agrarian party along, and we learn little about the local party functionaries that kept the party afloat. From a broader perspective, a more in-depth approach could have shed light on one of the more interesting mysteries in peasant politics during the interbellum period: why such hordes of peasants accepted the renunciation of agrarian self-interest and aligned themselves with abstract nationalism. King Alexander’s authoritarian tactics and the political intrigues within the Yugoslavian parliament led the Croatian peasant party to emphasize its nationalist message. Radić became more and more politically radical during the last years of his life, and took more and more control of the party and its politics.

Biondich describes Radić as a man with intuitive political gifts, and with a unique personal charm as both a leader and an orator: a person one would readily associate with the Weberian concept of charismatic authority. But as a person, Radić also presents many paradoxes. He was a devout Christian but, like many prominent agrarian leaders, also a staunch opponent of the power of the Church and of the Church as an organization and, despite his nationalist message, he opposed the national chauvinism of both the Catholic and the Orthodox churches. Even as he fought for the rural poor, he had very little interest in the less advantaged urban inhabitants. Where Bell’s book on Stamboliĭski reflects the 1970s interest in social issues, Biondich’s book can be seen as a response to the 1990s interest in ethnic relations and radicalization. However, Biondich stays within the historical realm, and with the nationalist message espoused by the agrarian movement. Radić’s role as a martyr in the Fascist Ustasha movement and among Croatian nationalists in the 1990s is touched upon only briefly. If Stamboliĭski and Radić represent agrarian movements with political or nationalist radical positions, then the reform-oriented Czechoslovakian agrarian party under Antonín Švehla represents the opposite pole. The main subject of American historian Daniel Miller’s *Forging Political Compromise* is the creation of politically sustainable compromises, with Švehla and political developments in Czechoslovakia serving as the central illustrative example. This is a topic of major general significance in that Czechoslovakia was, along with Finland, one of only two new nations formed after World War I in which democracy survived up until the outbreak of the next major war.

Švehla played a key role in the development of both the party organization and the parliamentary system during the first post-war decade. He served as Home Secretary from 1918 to 1920, and as Prime Minister from 1925 to 1929. His ability to bring different interests together had a major impact in terms of the political coalitions that governed the country and continued to impact its political life and culture even after his death. The introduction to the book paints an excellent picture of the dominant parties and political issues in Czechoslovakia up until 1938, and reveals how the politics reflected the ethnic and social dividing lines in the country, as well as the differences between the urban and rural areas. When the agrarian party was formed in Bohemia prior to the war, it was more in the nature of a producers’ party than a land reform one. This must be viewed as a natural consequence of the fact that Czechoslovakia was far more economically advanced and diverse than, say,
Croatia or Bulgaria, and as an explanation for why the party evolved into a parliamentary party rather than a reform movement.

Miller expresses great admiration for the politician, but he is by no means blind to the fact that Švehla was also a master of working behind the scenes and exploiting corruption, although only to achieve political aims, not personal ones. In contrast to Stamboliiski and Radić, Švehla was neither an outstanding orator nor a public personality, but he nevertheless earned respect in most political situations. Švehla’s successes were based on the culture of compromise that characterized the entire formation of Czechoslovakia as a nation.

Miller offers few insights into the life that Švehla lived as a private person. As a result, this book also slowly moves away from being a biography to become an in-depth party history, with Švehla as the central figure. Despite individual differences among the portrayed agrarian leaders Stamboliiski, Radić, and Švehla, it is the similarities between them that stay with the reader. They were all gifted sons of the peasantry who received an education, even if Švehla may be considered more trained than educated, and the talents they possessed took them abroad to study. Like other contemporary agrarian leaders such as Estonia’s Konstantin Päts or Latvia’s Čārlis Ulmanis, they spent their young, active years educating the peasants and modernizing both their thinking and the agriculture itself. This flies somewhat in the face of Eric Wolf’s familiar dictum that peasants need leaders from without in order to be radicalized, notwithstanding that these peasant sons did receive their impulses from the non-agrarian world.

The agrarian movements and their political agendas usually bore a local stamp, even though their ideologies were rather similar, and even though attempts were made at the international level to unite them into a common front against socialism via the so-called “Green International” in Prague, initiatives in which all of the leaders in question were involved. Each of the books addressed here has difficulty lifting its perspective out of the local context, from the party it concerns, and from the country in which that party was active. This is regrettable because, viewed in this light the agrarian movements appear as footnotes, rather than as political forces that had a major impact on the development of interbellum Europe.

**Johan eellend**

3. Päts and Ulmanis have not had their political achievements studied from a scholarly or otherwise critical perspective, with the exception of Martti Turtola’s *Presidentti Konstantin Päts: Viito ja Suomi eriteillä*, Helsinki 2002, and Edgars Dunsdorf’s, *Kārļa Ulmaņa dzīve: Ceļinieks, Polītiķis, Diktātors, Mockeklis*, Stockholm 1978.

**AGRARIAN SOCIETY** is not always given the attention it deserves in historical research. For much of the 20th century, the farmer was relatively invisible in Swedish historical research: themes touching on agricultural history were dealt with mainly in other disciplines. The situation was different in other Nordic countries. Agricultural history was studied in the early 20th century in Finland and Norway in an attempt to write the history of the common people – peasant society had to stand in for the longstanding nation-state that did not exist. In both countries, the scholars who set the tone were influenced by historical materialism and Lamprechtian cultural history. Light was to be shed on the collective, and not the individuals. The farmers became important in the representation of national – and political – development.

The turning towards social history in the 1970s and 1980s brought the agrarian element into Swedish historical research, whose breadth and scope are borne out in a volume in honor of Janken Myrdal, professor of agricultural history at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences in Uppsala. Some thirty scholars, Swedish and foreign, have written articles for the book. Their contributions clearly show the multifaceted nature of current Swedish agricultural history research. Reflecting the honoree’s research interests, much attention is devoted to the Middle Ages. In line with the deep-rooted traditions of agricultural history, the scholars take new and intriguing approaches to technology, implements, objects, and economic questions.

Inspired by climate history, Carl-Johan Gadd revisits an old question in ethnology, the prevalence of plowing implements and distribution of the plow. Gadd believes that the ard, usually understood as more ancient, was used on lands where evaporation could exceed precipitation. Human geographer Mats Widgren also points to connections between climate history and agricultural history and stresses the need for global perspectives.

The editors have allowed space for methodological questions, from the emphasis of micro-history on individual texts to readings of the landscape as sources, from the image of the farmer in the newspapers to gendered advertising for milking machines. One sees here that the “cultural turn” has left deep traces. The anthropology is diverse, yet the reluctance of agricultural historians to stray into political history is apparent. Rolf Adamson is an exception: he shows how grain supply and grain prices can help explain political unrest.

**SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC** research is given wide scope in another book in honor of Finnish sociologist Leo Granberg. Pirjo Siiskonen describes the roots and formation of Finnish rural research in the 1970s. Disciplines such as ethnology and folklorism (the subjects are separately treated in Finland) were built up around peasant society, but many early social scientific studies, now considered classics, were also concerned with rural communities and their problems.

Several contributions to the anthology may be regarded as village studies,