

SRĐAN MILOŠEVIĆ
Union University, Faculty of Law
Institute for recent history of Serbia, Belgrade
srdjan.milosevic@pravnofakultet.rs

AGRARIAN REFORM IN YUGOSLAVIA 1945–1948: THE AGRO-POLITICAL ASPECT

Abstract: This paper presents a general overview of agrarian reform implemented in Yugoslavia between 1945 and 1948. It also lays out the norms and agrarian policies on which it was based. Agrarian reform was enacted in Yugoslavia in harmony with the specific nature of the Yugoslav context and the lauded union of workers and peasants. This context widely differed from that of the USSR, which is why the nationalization of arable land was not considered in Yugoslavia. In fact, at the beginning of the reform process, private property was given stronger protections. This included issuing deeds of ownership in the names of individuals but with certain limitations, of which the most significant was a twenty-year moratorium on the alienation of property obtained from the reforms.

Keywords: Yugoslavia 1945–1948, agrarian reform, union of workers and peasants, nationalization.

1. Introduction

Agrarian reform, according to an ideologically neutral definition from a United Nations document, is “an integrated programme of measures designed to eliminate obstacles to economic and social development arising out of defects in the agrarian structure.”¹ According to another definition, agrarian reform is defined as “the redistribution of property in land for the benefit of agricultural workers.”² However, agrarian reform can also be a much more radical measure that requires “compulsory, drastic, and rapid” changes in land ownership, since a program based on “moderate, and gradual tenurial adjustments” would inevitably be “perfunctory and ineffectual.”³

It is impossible to understand agrarian reform and colonization in Yugoslavia after its liberation in 1945 outside the context of interwar agrarian reform, the experience of World War II in Yugoslavia, and the successfully created “union of workers and peasants.”

¹ *Progress in Land Reform*, Third Report, UN, 1962, vi.

² Warriner 1969: xiv.

³ Hung-chao Tai 1974: 11, 19.

It also cannot be understood in isolation from the Yugoslav communists' specific theoretical and ideological concepts, which evolved between 1919 and 1945.

There were a series of unresolved issues left over from the agrarian reform enacted during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1919–1941). The biggest impact for its interested parties was being denied the right to register land ownership until the former owner had been paid for the land in full. In many cases, the outbreak of World War II put this on hold. The kingdom's reforms were the very image of inconsistency and appeasement of landowners who were "impacted" by it (concessions were even made to owners with holdings of feudal origins that was meant to be distributed entirely to the peasants). It had been full of various abuses, legal chaos, and ethnic inequality (Serbs were the most privileged, as were other south Slavs, albeit to a lesser extent, while Albanians and Germans were the most harshly discriminated against).⁴ Its relatively modest results, however, were utterly erased during World War II (especially by the forced eviction and slaughter of Serbs who had voluntarily resettled in Croatia, Vojvodina, Macedonia, and Kosovo during the interwar period), and they even resulted in a kind of re-feudalization in certain occupied areas (Kosovo and Macedonia).⁵

Considering the communists' position regarding the interwar agrarian reforms, one could make a strong argument that if the communists had adhered to their own principles and promises when they came to power, and land had been given to the peasants, the great estates would not have been able to survive.⁶ But precisely how the peasants would be allocated land after the communists took over had yet to be defined. In this respect, the peasantry's mass participation in the war within Yugoslav territory was significant: The communists were now obligated to fulfill the aspirations of a wide swath of the population consisting, to a large extent, of partisans who had fought a guerrilla war for liberation from fascism.⁷ Furthermore, changes in property relations in rural areas had begun during the war, when peasants refused to pay rent and some landowners abandoned their estates that were then taken over by the peasants.⁸

2. Agrarian reform as a measure of agrarian policy: A normative framework

A new agrarian reform⁹ was announced in March 1945 in a declaration by the provisional government of the Democratic Federal Yugoslavia (DFJ), but it is telling that the peasants were promised in the declaration "the right to use" the land and its inventory.¹⁰ Transferring the land to private ownership was not mentioned, nor was anything else more specific. This was due to both domestic and international politics; circumstances were not

⁴ Erić 1958: 281–290; Petranović 1988: 63; Janjetović 2005: 234–246.

⁵ Milošević 2015a: 253–279.

⁶ Milošević 2015b: 101–127.

⁷ Milošević 2016: 180–190.

⁸ Stipetić 1954: 431.

⁹ More details: Gaćeša 1984; Radaković 1953: 18–26; Rašić 1955; Petranović 1964: 56–70; see also 1969: 397–411; Gudac-Dodić 1999: 21–36; Lekić 1997; Bokovoy 1998: 29–54; Klein & Klein: 25–38.

¹⁰ *Borba*, March 10, 1945: 1.

favorable to any kind of radical solutions¹¹ and the communists themselves were uncertain as to what they intended to do. Defining, let alone promulgating, the principles on which the reforms would be based would need to wait at least until the war ended, as would establishing a legal basis for them.¹²

In any case, the upcoming agrarian reform would be one of the primary embodiments of a “union of workers and peasants” in Yugoslavia through which the party would fulfill its part.¹³ During a debate within the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) on agrarian reform in April 1945, one of the party’s main authorities on theory, Moša Pijade, argued that part of the land should be given to the peasants outright, and they should also be granted use of state-owned land in perpetuity and without charge.¹⁴ Historiography has already acknowledged the originality of such a duality in land ownership,¹⁵ but it should be noted here that Pijade’s position was clearly a reflection of the Soviet Union’s experience. In fact, Pijade had explicitly said that state land should be for use in perpetuity, just as it was in the USSR. However, there is also a misconception that Pijade was the main advocate of an agrarian reform that would distribute land to the peasants.¹⁶ It is true that he was one of the first to speak about it publicly, and that he promoted the party’s positions on the issue according to the principles of democratic centralism, but initially he had held a different position.

The dilemma of whether peasants should be given land in private ownership or land should be nationalized and peasants given the right of use did not last long. The prevailing view among the party leadership was that land should be given over to private ownership and properly recorded in the land registry. This was first put forward by Edvard Kardelj, another of the leading Yugoslav party theorists, who openly criticized any other solution.¹⁷ It is also important to note that this solution was adopted against the advice of Soviet experts to nationalize land ownership.¹⁸

As Boris Kidrič later explained, during the Cominform conflict, the peasantry in Yugoslavia was not only the main component of the National Liberation Movement (NOP), but was already socially and economically territorialized, which presented an obstacle to nationalization. According to Marx, nationalizing land is, in fact, a radical, revolutionary, bourgeois measure because it removed landowners (usually of feudal origin) from the production equation. The landowner (who only collects rent and is not a producer) is completely unnecessary in a capitalist system. “That is why in theory the radical bourgeoisie arrives at the repudiation of private landed property... In practice however, since the attack on one form of property, private property in relation to the conditions of labor, would be very dangerous for the other form. Moreover, the bourgeoisie has territorialized itself.”¹⁹ (Here, territorialization refers to possession of the land by the capitalists themselves).

¹¹ Gaćeša 1984: 85–91.

¹² Petranović 1969: 56.

¹³ Šuvar 1969: 1017.

¹⁴ Pijade 1965: 230.

¹⁵ Gaćeša 1984: 98.

¹⁶ Bokovoy 1998: 36–37.

¹⁷ Gaćeša 1984: 98; Gudac-Dodić 1999: 22–23.

¹⁸ Mates 1976: 98–99.

¹⁹ Marx, Engels 1972: 33.

Lenin saw such a “radical bourgeoisie” in the Russian peasantry, who were not territorialized (meaning they did not own the land they cultivated), and therefore rather than being opposed to the nationalization of land, were instead quite interested by it (provided that they obtain use of it in some form).²⁰ In Yugoslavia, however, the peasantry was already territorialized and would thus not be interested in nationalizing the land. This meant there needed to be a strong emphasis on agrarian reform as a revolutionary bourgeois measure because it would reinforce the working peasantry’s ownership over the land. As Kidrič said, when summarizing the development of capitalism in the Yugoslav countryside, “There is no doubt that during these processes, which lasted a hundred and fifty years in some regions of modern-day Yugoslavia, our peasant is firmly ‘territorialized’... This means that the small and middle peasant in our country is not only a commodity producer but also a landowner, an owner of labor and the means of productions, in this case the land... Both the Russian peasant in 1917 and the Yugoslav peasant in 1945 are small commodity producers. But while the former was primarily an *arendator* (lease holder), the latter owned the land but was in constant danger of losing it or being robbed, exploited, indebted, or burdened with mortgages often worth more than the price of his land. But *he owns it and defends it*, and this is necessarily reflected in his psychology.” Under these circumstances, nationalizing the land would constitute a “disaster for the Yugoslav people’s revolution” and turn small and middle peasants from allies to an “active reserve for the bourgeoisie.”²¹ These subsequent explanations were not initially offered in 1945, but there is no reason to doubt they were known at the time.

In June 1945, when the prevailing position within the party was that land should be distributed to the peasants, the leader of the Yugoslav communists, Prime Minister Josip Broz Tito, announced that the new government was preparing for agrarian reform, and emphasized it was ready to execute it “very radically, so the issue would not come up again, as it had in the twenty-five years preceding the war.” At the time, however, Tito also indicated that he still could not say how the issue would be resolved, and that it would “probably” be dealt with “in the Constituent Assembly.”²²

However, working out the legal basis for agrarian reform could not wait for the Constituent Assembly and was addressed earlier. The entire legislative process was completed during July and August of 1945. However, before passing the law that would lay out the reform, some previous issues needed to be dealt with. Regardless of what form the agrarian reform took, any potential malfeasance that would compromise it need to be averted. Thus a regulation was passed preventing the future targets of agrarian reform from buying or selling or going into debt. If this regulation was violated, penalties laid out in the Law on the Suppression of Unlawful Speculation would apply.²³ This solution was the first post-liberation legal limitation on the right to dispose of property that applied to all citizens. Trade in real estate would not be reintroduced until 1954.²⁴

²⁰ Lenin 1972: 320.

²¹ Kidrič 1985b: 186–188.

²² Tito 1959a: 331.

²³ *Official Gazette of DFJ*, No. 48, 1945.

²⁴ Božić 1974: 465.

The feudal relations re-established during the war were abolished by the Law on Revision of Land Allotments to Colonists and Agrarian Interests in Macedonia and Kosovo-Metohija. This law was also significant because it allowed land to be confiscated from a number of interwar colonists, mostly Serbs, in these areas. They had been settled in Kosovo and Macedonia according to a policy during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia that was meant to increase the number of Yugoslavs, and especially Serbs, in the area. After World War II, these colonists were not allowed to return to Kosovo or Macedonia. Specifically, the law stipulated that those who did not farm the land themselves or who had been awarded land unjustly confiscated from the local population could not return to the land they had been previously allocated. In fact, most of the law's provisions were identical to those of legislation introduced by the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which also stipulated that land could not be obtained by, or would be removed from, any who did not farm it themselves. The only important new item in the 1945 law was a ban on former colonists returning to land that had belonged to political emigres from Macedonia and Kosovo.²⁵ The law was later confirmed with amendments that did not apply to the terms under which the right to formerly allocated land was revoked, but unlike the previous version, the amended law granted the right to file an appeal with an appellate court.²⁶

An important issue also raised in connection to agrarian reform was that of the agrarian maximum. It was evident from a July 1945 report from the minister of agriculture, Vasa Čubrilović, that there was no existing resolution for the issue. In the report, the minister defined mid-sized holdings as ranging between five and fifty hectares, but allowed for the possibility for them to be reduced to thirty hectares. Moreover, Čubrilović also allowed for a "larger peasant" category with holdings ranging between fifty and one hundred hectares. He suggested that the lowest acceptable maximum was 50 hectares, but "if the maximum were to be decreased from fifty to thirty hectares...it would cut into the mid-sized peasant property," and because of this, the issue "should be fully investigated beforehand."²⁷

Certainly, the appointment of a bourgeois politician as the minister of agriculture is difficult to explain beyond an assumption that the important agriculture portfolio was assigned to him to send a message that no radical measures in this area would be planned. Also, in July 1945, the deputy minister of agriculture, Maksim Goranović, when speaking about agrarian reform at a conference of agricultural administrators, pointed out that the reform would only be carried out in accordance with the principle that land belonged to the peasantry, but "considering the Law on Agrarian Reform and Colonization would be passed soon," he gave no further details.²⁸

Čubrilović officially provided the rationale behind the draft version of the Law on Agrarian Reform and Colonization for the first time on 11 August 1945 at a session of the Legislative Committee of the National Assembly. This proposed legislation was something that could be endorsed by a number of bourgeois politicians and leftwing intellectuals—and especially by those more sensitive to the peasantry's difficult position during the interwar

²⁵ *Official Gazette of DFJ*, No. 56, 1945; Obradović 1974.

²⁶ *Official Gazette of DFJ*, No. 89, 1946.

²⁷ AJ, KMJ, III – 2 – b/8.

²⁸ AJ, SPŠ, 2, 25.

period. One of these was Minister Čubrilović. He criticized the practices during this period of “merchants and industrialists, public employees” buying land and renting it out, along with keeping large swaths of land “in the cold hands of churches, trusts, and other institutions,” which left less land for the peasantry. This was why the minister announced that the time had come to implement the principle that “the land belongs to those who till it.”²⁹ He was convinced agrarian reform would be “one of the most popular and just measures enacted by the new Yugoslavia,” and it should “take the land away from the old owners because they do not till it, and then distribute it among the peasants.”³⁰

Moša Pijade also joined in explaining the principles behind the law. He pointed to the fact that the draft law did not collectivize land but instead gave ownership to the peasantry that had participated in the war in droves. However, it also allowed for the possibility “that people who receive the land could voluntarily express a desire to band together and farm the land as a group according to a long-term contract they would agree together.”³¹

Some bourgeois politicians voiced general concerns about this reform being enacted too quickly and without sufficient preparation. Milan Grol, the vice president of the provisional government and one of the main representatives of the bourgeois faction, claimed that not only was the law being pushed through “in one fell swoop,” there were other fundamental shortcomings. Grol paradoxically expressed the regret that “collectivists in this case are not collectivist enough,” while also taking a stand against dismantling large estates that comprised an “organic whole,” suggesting that, in these cases, they should “start with property rather interested parties,” and that land should be farmed “on a cooperative basis.” Grol also criticized the first steps taken toward collectivizing existing individual peasant households, and especially smallholders banding together into collective peasant labor cooperatives (SRZ). He pointed out that the “big question” was whether becoming part of an SRZ would be voluntary. Finally, in terms of land ownership, he claimed it would be wrong to seize land from non-farmers who proved to be good organizers, “who are capable of perfecting agricultural production, and who enjoy this work.”³²

The draft of the Law on Agrarian Reform adopted by the legislative committee was sent to the provisional parliament, which adopted it on 23 August 1945. In a speech given before the parliament, Moša Pijade summarized these aspects and explained the reasoning behind the proposal. He criticized the interwar agrarian reform, pointed to the unity among workers and peasants during the war, and noted that the country simply did not have enough land to satisfy all of the peasants’ needs. The law would therefore return “only part of the debt” owed to them for their efforts during the war. He specifically pointed out that land given to the peasants as property would be recorded in the land register, but alienation of property would be prohibited for a period of twenty years. He also reminded them of the hard times during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, when a peasant’s land ownership was not recorded in the land register, and as “an unofficial owner... did not have a sense of certainty that he had truly become the owner of the land allocated to him.”³³

²⁹ Nešović 1952: 251.

³⁰ AJ, KMJ, III – 2 – b/8.

³¹ Nešović 1952: 254.

³² *Ibid.*: 255–56.

³³ FNRJ National Assembly 1946: 202–211.

The adopted law stipulated that all landholdings greater than forty-five hectares or with twenty-five to thirty-five hectares of arable land should be expropriated if it was farmed by hired labor. It would then be added to the land fund created for agrarian reform and colonization. This defined an agrarian maximum of forty-five hectares, or a range of twenty-five to thirty-five hectares, depending on the quality of the land. Landholdings owned by banks, businesses, joint stock companies, and other legal entities were also incorporated into the land fund. The same applied to properties belonging to churches and monasteries. These would be allowed to retain up to ten hectares, and up to thirty the land was of historical significance. In the interest of agrarian reform, all properties over three to five hectares were also confiscated unless they were farmed by the owners themselves and their families. In the end, the land fund would also include landholdings that had been abandoned during the war.³⁴

The Agrarian Council for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FNRJ) was created to implement the reform, and Pijade was quickly placed at its head. The other members were ministers in charge of agriculture and colonization and several other government officials.³⁵ The following year, the council was reorganized into the Commission for Agrarian Reform and Colonization.³⁶ The Ministry for Colonization, headed by Sreten Vukosavljević, whose views were becoming increasingly dissonant with those of his colleagues, was abolished.³⁷ Pijade had told the National Assembly that agrarian reform and colonization needed to be consolidated because “up until now it being done on two tracks,” which was the impetus for the reorganization.³⁸

Even though the interested party was registered as the owner (as opposed to standard practice in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia), land obtained through agrarian reform could not be alienated for twenty years, used as collateral, leased, or parcelled. There would be no compensation for land expropriated from those who rented it out. Farmers with parcels exceeding the maximum that were expropriated would be compensated. A land fund for agrarian reform and colonization was created to allocate land to agrarian interests and colonists consisting of 1) land confiscated under the Law on Agrarian Reform and Colonization and 2) property confiscated from the German population by fiat in November 1944, which became state-owned property independently from agrarian reform.³⁹

The Law on Agrarian Reform and Colonization was harshly criticized by some individuals in the provisional parliament who believed the reform would drastically reduce agricultural production. Members of the clergy voiced their own objections, but this had no effect on the government’s resolve to implement the reform as the law had prescribed.⁴⁰ The Catholic clergy was particularly opposed to the reform, to which Marshal Tito laconically replied, “the state will not allow churches to have enormous holdings while the peasants starve.”⁴¹ Confiscating land from churches and congregations was a sensitive issue, however,

³⁴ Petranović 1969: 57; Gaćeša 1984: 233–234.

³⁵ *Official Gazette of DFJ*, No. 67, 1945.

³⁶ *Official Gazette of FNRJ* No. 15, 1946.

³⁷ Isić 2012:

³⁸ First special session 1946: 81.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Petranović 1969: 59–61; Gaćeša 1984: 111–112; Radić 2002: 179–188; AJ, PV FNRJ, 4, 11.

⁴¹ Tito 1948: 228–229, 233.

so a decision was made to give the land to the members of the congregation whose place of worship was part of the land being expropriated.⁴² Since Yugoslavia was inhabited by members of the Orthodox, Catholic, and Islamic faiths, and considering that the war in Yugoslavia in 1941–1945 also had some religious elements, this proved to be a pragmatic solution.

The normative framework this law established was not precise enough in some areas and thus needed some clarifications and amendments. For example, according to the law, landholdings farmed by hired labor would also fall under the agrarian reform. To avoid a radical backlash, it was specified at a meeting held at the Ministry of Agriculture on 25 August 1945 that using hired labor to farm these holdings would mean the land could only be farmed with hired labor, and not “partially by hired labor.” In addition, it was made clear that hired labor in rural areas such as “loaned and similar cannot in any way be included under this term.”⁴³ The category of labor exploiters who would be affected by the agrarian reform was in fact narrowed by this interpretation.

Furthermore, it was decided at this meeting that “land owned by those who had attended lower or secondary agricultural schools or had completed a university degree in agriculture would be considered an agricultural holding, even if it was farmed by temporary labor.”⁴⁴ This was because a different interpretation that would treat these holdings as property of non-farmers would reduce them to three to five hectares as required by the law. This interpretation was based on the position that the aim of the state’s agricultural policy was “to improve farmers’ general education regarding farming, and the ultimate goal of this policy was for all farmers complete at least a primary education in agriculture in order to cultivate their land more effectively.” It would therefore not be expedient to remove farmers from production who had already been trained.⁴⁵ The government’s Agrarian Council adopted and expanded this standpoint, and the guidelines for adopting the republic’s legislation for agrarian reform allowed for educated farmers’ holdings to be considered agricultural land, even if the land was farmed by permanent (that is, not temporary) hired labor.⁴⁶ In the same guidelines, the council adopted the view that, for farmers with a more advanced education, any holding cultivated by an owner whose primary profession was farming would not be considered a large holding “even if had a surface area large enough to be considered a large holding” and even if it was farmed with “temporary labor.”⁴⁷

Despite these discussions, some issues regarding land status remained unresolved, and among those were various types of joint ownership. For example, if someone owned an individual property and was also a joint owner of another property, there was no legal answer as to whether these should be considered a single property. The Agrarian Council, which handled these issues, said that it was. Also, the issue of two spouses who each owned an individual property was considered especially pressing. An interesting debate on this issue ensued, and the prevailing position that emerged was that these did not comprise a unified landholding and therefore were not affected by the agrarian reform. This view was

⁴² A.J., UARK, 1, 1.

⁴³ AJ, SPŠ, 2, 25.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 2, 25.

⁴⁶ AJ, UARK, 1, 1.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

supported by the claim that, under socialism, “women have gained a new position in society, such that the marital union cannot be understood in the same way as it was previously.”⁴⁸

Part of the problem also stemmed from the fact that, after World War II, Yugoslavia had been structured as a federation. Implementing agrarian reform and colonization was relegated to republics, who were now members of the federation. However, the Law on Agrarian Reform and Colonization did not specifically mention holdings located in one or multiple republics, so in February 1946 a binding decision was rendered regulating this matter. According to this decision, if the total area of a landholding constituted one large property, each republic would expropriate the portion located within its borders. If it was farmland, the owner/farmer would be allowed to keep the maximum number of hectares within the republic of his choosing. This decision also stipulated that the same would hold if the property was not agricultural.⁴⁹

Significant amendments to the law from 23 August 1945 were also made in February 1946. First, a very important amendment extended the right of ownership over property distributed as part of the agrarian reform was registered to all members of a household rather than just its head. Next, landowners whose land had been expropriated were allowed to retain up to five hectares if it could be demonstrated they had no other property or means of support. The amount of land in excess of the allotted three hectares expropriated from non-farmers would be allocated to his closest relatives who were also farmers, provided that this expansion to their holdings did not exceed the maximum prescribed by law.⁵⁰

The reasoning behind the first of these may have been connected to the creation of cooperatives and meant to enable family members wanting to join a cooperative to contribute their share of the landholding. The second provision, however, had a clear motive behind it related to social welfare. Finally, judging by Čubrilović’s previously mentioned August 1945 address, the third provision was initially part of the basis for the original decision. When explaining his position, the minister said, “The son of a peasant completes his schooling and becomes a doctor, lawyer, or professor. And according to inheritance law, he receives a patrimony—let’s say twenty hectares.” According to the new law, however, “he cannot keep those twenty hectares, and rather than being transferred to the land fund, those hectares revert to his family members, who are still farmers. There is a type of intellectual who has no regard for his brethren in the countryside once he completes his schooling, so a provision like this is fully justified. We also allow those with land in the countryside retain up to five hectares. This is a large enough amount of for a man with a love for working the land to have and maintain a respectable holding, an orchard, a garden, and so on, in addition to his work in the city.”⁵¹

For agrarian interests, this status was, at least in principle, somewhat simpler to determine than it was for the “objects” of agrarian reform. Farmers with little or no land, whose only or primary vocation was farming, had rights to the land. Priority was given to war veterans and to the families of those who had died in action, victims of fascist terror, those who had

⁴⁸ AJ, SPŠ, 2, 25.

⁴⁹ *Official Gazette of DFJ*, No. 16, 1946.

⁵⁰ *Official Gazette of DFJ*, No. 24, 1946.

⁵¹ Nešović 1952: 251–252.

been disabled in prior wars (1912–1918). According to Čubrilović, it was “beyond any doubt...that when distributing land, it is the duty of the government of the new Yugoslavia to be mindful of those who sacrificed the most for the national liberation movement.” Although he strongly emphasized this principle, he nevertheless insisted that they be only be afforded this advantage if they were prepared to farm the land, and if a participant in the war wanted land only “because he was a Partisan...he should be denied.”⁵² If, however, they did not own land or did not have enough of it, the NOP fighters would be given priority when land was allocated.⁵³ The Commission for Settling Veterans in Vojvodina was given a mandate to make decisions regarding the settlement of combatants in Vojvodina.⁵⁴

It was particularly significant that the law stipulated that the land fund would allocate a significant amount of land for the good of state-run agriculture.⁵⁵ The management of this fund was entrusted to the State Agricultural Commission for the Management of State Agricultural Holdings,⁵⁶ headed by Maksim Goranović. Once they had acquired land that had fallen under agrarian reform, landowners were required to farm it and would be fined if they did not do so.⁵⁷

In February 1946, when the Constitution of the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia was adopted, Article 19 of the constitution codified several important principles, some of which had already been implemented in practice: “The land belongs to those who till it. The law establishes whether and how much land an institution or an individual who is not a farmer can possess. Under no circumstances may large landholdings be held in private hands. The maximum size of a private landholding is determined by law. The state protects and assists the poor and middle peasant in particular with general economic policies, low credit rates, and the tax system.”⁵⁸

3. Implementation of agrarian reform

After the regulations for agrarian reform were decided upon, and it was clear that land would be distributed among the peasants, party leaders and lower-level cadres sought to present this resolution as the strongest validation of the union of workers and peasants. “We are strengthening and will be strengthening the economic potential of the small and middle peasant,” Boris Kidrič, president of the federal Economic Council, said, most certainly not without a hint of political opportunism. “That we do not implement the provisions of agrarian reform related to the land belonging to those who farm it... no one would ask that of us, for we are a government of the working people. The interests of the working peasant demand that both our small and middle peasants fully participate in the proper implementation of all our agrarian measures. And it is the duty of our activists to properly interpret these measures for the people and to fight against not only the vile slander

⁵² AJ, KMJ, III – 2 – b/8.

⁵³ *Official Gazette of DFJ*, No. 68, 1945.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* No. 71, 1945.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* No. 64, 1945.

⁵⁶ *Official Gazette of FNRJ* No. 10/1946.

⁵⁷ *Official Gazette of DFJ*, No. 74, 1945.

⁵⁸ *Official Gazette of FNRJ* No. 10/1946.

of reactionary forces but also any sectarian disfigurement.”⁵⁹ This last part was a warning of sorts to overly radical individuals to refrain from airing out their egalitarian enthusiasm. Kidrič, mindful that the law left a possibility open for agrarian interests to join together within cooperatives, stressed that it would nevertheless be wrong and dangerous to make labor cooperatives a condition for allocating land to the peasants. The goal of agrarian reform was for peasants to receive land unconditionally, and they would decide later about organizing. Yet it is evident from this that there were various conditions within the allocation process related to joining a cooperative. These were criticized, but the creation of peasant cooperatives was certainly promoted and encouraged—and even coerced—although, at the time, it was not a priority for the Yugoslav communist authorities.

Now that a legislative framework was in place, the systemic implementation of the agrarian reform could now begin. The agrarian commissions and courts in charge of implementing the reform were mostly staffed by representatives of the rural poor. They were the liveliest participants in the agrarian debates that decided the objectives of agrarian reform. This enabled the poor, working peasantry “to become the judge of the exploiters” and to manifest its “revolutionary will,” while also enabling the party to consolidate an alliance between the proletariat and the working peasantry. Although the legal maximum was thirty-five hectares, in practice the more affluent peasants were left with up to twenty hectares.⁶⁰ One person observed that, “in this struggle for land, it was not just the communists in the villages who were well schooled in class struggle. So too were the broader peasant masses who defended the Law on Agrarian Reform from its enemies.”⁶¹

The general political and social atmosphere in rural areas undoubtedly gave rise to radicalism. Such individuals could easily be found in the governmental bodies carrying out the agrarian reform. One of these, for example, was a veteran from Trstenik, a fighter in the struggle “against capitalism,” who was in fact disappointed in how the reform was being implemented because “it is not being done the way they said it would be,” and because “there are even bigger capitalists...many, many of them.” One of those, in his opinion, was a widow “who owns around ten hectares of land of the first order, and also has about fifty male sheep, several pairs of cattle, and a large number of pigs.” Despite these riches hidden in plain sight, this property clearly did not fall under agrarian reform, but this overzealous veteran was convinced that, in this case, “at least the property” should be confiscated. He concluded his letter with the eternal question asked by many disillusioned revolutionaries throughout history, justifiably or not: “Is *this* what we really fought for?”⁶²

Most of the work to implement the reform was carried out by the republics’ ministries of agriculture, by which “the harmful consequences of centralization” would be averted. Departments for agrarian reform and colonization were created within a Ministry of Agriculture and Colonization in each of the republics, with the exception of Serbia, which

⁵⁹ Kidrič 1985a: 172.

⁶⁰ *5th Congress* 1948: 728. This happened, for example, with a peasant from the Valjevo region who complained to Edvard Kardelj, the chairman of the federal Commission for State Oversight, because his family and those of his son and grandson had been left with the maximum of twenty hectares, but he claimed he was entitled to double the maximum. *AJ, PV FNRJ*, 4, 11.

⁶¹ *5th Congress* 1948: 740.

⁶² *AJ, SPS*, 111, 685.

had a separate ministry for this. The Agricultural Council of the Government of the DFJ/FPRJ, and later the Commission for Agrarian Reform along with the Economics Council, coordinated the republics' reform work at the federal level. Then cantonal or city commissions for agrarian reform and colonization were formed at the more local levels. Finally, local agrarian interest committees, usually made up of five members, were formed as advisory boards to these commissions to represent the area served by each local people's committee. A public debate about each landholding was held by the cantonal commission for agrarian reform and colonization.⁶³

The process of agrarian reform proceeded as follows: After gathering information about an estate that fell under agrarian reform, the District People's Committee (*Sreski narodni odbor*), would schedule an expropriation hearing, at which a representative of the Communal People's Committee (*Mesni narodni odbor*) would also be present. The discussion would be scheduled three days in advance and held at the seat of the communal committee with the landowner also present. A decision would be announced two days later. The owner had the right to file an appeal with the Agrarian Court before the District People's Committee within three days, and the Agrarian Court's decision could not be appealed. When the land was seized, an assembly of agrarian stakeholders was convened to decide who the land should be allocated to and how much they should receive. The MNO would again have two days to reach a decision, after which any of the interested parties could appeal to the Agrarian Court. Once a legally binding decision was reached regarding the distribution of land, the land was provisionally divided into parcels and provisionally distributed. Then if there were no further issues, the final parcellation was completed according to the MNO ruling, after which the MNO rendered a decision legally granting ownership of the parcels to the interested parties. The decision was presented to the recipients and the former owner, all of whom had eight days to file an appeal.⁶⁴

The reform also had an impact on some middle peasants who were "by no means subject to the Law on Agrarian Reform...Attempts were made to declare some slightly wealthier peasants as landowners," and "people were stripped of libraries and personal belongings that were in no way subject to the Law on Agrarian Reform." Some party leaders demanded that such "experiments," which were causing a great deal of harm, "must absolutely be stopped."⁶⁵ An examination of extant documents will not establish a clear picture of the extent to which governmental authorities on the ground went to correct these errors, but it can be established that some illegally seized property was returned.⁶⁶ In such an atmosphere, there is no way to know how much actual significance the state authorities' relatively flexible explanations carried regarding who could keep the maximum amount of land, or if landholdings exceeded the maximum. It seems almost idealistic that one of the most important criteria for implementing agrarian reform in Yugoslavia after World War II was the "owner's working relationship to the land," and that "every owner, or category of owner, will be approached not uniformly but individually, by first determining their relationship to the land.

⁶³ Stipetić 1954: 434.

⁶⁴ Babić 1946: 105.

⁶⁵ Kidrič 1985a: 190.

⁶⁶ AJ, PV FNRJ, 89, 188; *Ibid.*, 134, 277.

Only based on this will it be decided which landholdings should be expropriated and where only land exceeding the maximum should be taken and compensated.”⁶⁷

There is no doubt, however, that the explanations aimed at curbing radicalism prompted many of the larger landowners to flock to the competent authorities with various certificates and assurances of their alleged agricultural qualifications.⁶⁸ It is also true that some managed to hold on to relatively large estates. In a lecture for party cadres at the High Party School, participants were informed that “by limiting the maximum to thirty hectares,” the regulations from the reform had “struck a significant blow to capitalist elements,” but there were “capitalist elements who still had the maximum, and even some even had double the maximum.”⁶⁹ How widespread this was remains unknown.

A special order issued in October 1946 waived any fees for registering the ownership of land obtained through the agrarian reform in the land registry.⁷⁰ Beneficiaries of the agrarian reform would also be given assistance in farming the land, which would be provided by the agro-mechanical stations⁷¹ and the local people’s committees.⁷²

All in all, approximately 1.7 million hectares of land from agrarian reform went into the land fund. Of this, around 1.3 million hectares were arable (about 13 percent of the total amount of arable land) and around 0.4 million hectares were forested. By July 1946, the bulk of the land from the fund earmarked for agrarian interests had been assigned. By the time the implementation of the reform ended in 1948, about 0.8 million hectares had been distributed to the interested parties, while the remainder was being used for other purposes (state agricultural holdings, holdings for various institutions, etc.). Around 315,000 peasant families received land through the agrarian reform, either as complete parcels or as additions to existing landholdings. It was especially emphasized that, unlike in the old Yugoslavia, under the new agrarian reform “nationality, religion, etc. did not play any role,” which was undoubtedly true. Farmers were given both land and farming inventory.

At the same time, there was an awareness that the reform would also mean land fragmentation and an inevitable drop in production. Tito pointed out that the reform was detrimental to fiscal interests, but that this was not its primary focus, which was its social function. He expressed his expectation that production would increase as soon as possible, which was why assistance had been secured for the peasants and, above all, for those colonists who were inexperienced in farming.⁷³ This expectation was based on the peasants’ increased interest in production. Since the land was now theirs, they would have a lifelong interest “in increasing the land’s fertility [and] increasing the people’s income from the land.”⁷⁴

The twenty-year restriction on the alienation of land introduced into the Law on Agrarian Reform and Colonization was adopted, as it was claimed, “to protect the beneficiaries of agrarian reform from attacks by capitalist elements to seize their land when

⁶⁷ Stipetić 1954: 433.

⁶⁸ Petranović 1969: 399.

⁶⁹ AJ, VPŠ, 56, 1037.

⁷⁰ *Official Gazette of FNRJ* No. 82, 1946.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* No. 71, 1946.

⁷² *Ibid.* No. 13, 1947.

⁷³ Tito, “Conference with Members of the Press,” *Izgradnja*, I-1, 228–22.

⁷⁴ Burzevski, Goranović 1947: 11–14.

they are still economically weak.” Nevertheless, these restrictions turned out to be an obstacle not only for the recipients themselves, but also for some aspects of state agrarian policy. The state also allocated land from the agrarian reform fund to certain cooperatives to provide economic support, especially for constructing facilities for the cooperatives. Because the cooperatives were mainly established by beneficiaries of the reform, mortgages could not be taken out on the allocated land to finance the loans needed to build the commercial economic facilities necessary for the cooperatives. Independent peasants who were beneficiaries of agrarian reform also faced the same problem. Furthermore, the regulations prohibiting landholdings from being divided prevented the division of households. This was basically an inevitable process that could not be stopped, so it continued in practice without any formal sanctions, “from which various conflicts arose.”⁷⁵

To resolve these issues, the amendments to the Law on Agrarian Reform and Colonization from 1948 allowed for the division of households that had been created as a result of agrarian reform. This was possible only if the division created two agricultural households,⁷⁶ thereby fully affirming the law from February 1946, which extended the right of ownership of allocated land to all members of the household.

4. Conclusion

The country’s agrarian reform fund included 1.65 million hectares of land, of which 1.15 million hectares were distributed, and 400,000 hectares of forest and 100,000 hectares of other land remained undistributed. Some 709,000 hectares were distributed to the private sector across 334,117 households of various categories. The socialist sector (state agricultural holdings, peasant cooperatives, and various institutions and enterprises) received altogether about 434,000 hectares.⁷⁷

Officially, agrarian reform was executed in order to “liquidate the remains of feudalism, weaken and limit capitalist elements in rural areas, and strengthen the union between workers and peasants.”⁷⁸ According to the communists, its strong effect on capitalist elements in rural areas would also reduce their exploitative potential, and was thus “a major step for the democratization and social development of rural areas” in which small and medium peasants would become increasingly liberated from the country’s “last form of capitalist exploitation.”⁷⁹ By achieving this, agrarian reform “gave land to small and poor peasants, thereby fulfilling their centuries-old dream, while also laying down the initial foundations for the socialist sector in agriculture.”⁸⁰

The process of agrarian reform “equalized” the agrarian structure by transitioning affluent peasants into the middle class while simultaneously transitioning poor peasants into the same class.⁸¹ It was “the great dilemma of which path to take: the path of nationalization

⁷⁵ AJ, SPŠ, 119, 676.

⁷⁶ *Official Gazette of FNRJ* No. 105, 1948; Gaćeša 1984: 357–358.

⁷⁷ Gaćeša 1984: 367.

⁷⁸ *V. Kongres* 1949: 562.

⁷⁹ Begović 1949: 310.

⁸⁰ Kidrič 1985b: 197.

⁸¹ Vučković 1954: 37–45.

or the path of agrarian reform and agricultural cooperation. Under the given socioeconomic circumstances existing immediately after liberation, the latter along with this form of agrarian reform was the most appropriate solution.”⁸² The absence of a nationalization of land, as well as the ideological discomfort that arose from a kind of agrarian reform that put land into private ownership by consolidating small and medium-sized holdings, can be explained by the fact that this reform also equalized agricultural revenue with the level of wages and almost completely abolished land rent.⁸³ However, the socialist essence of the 1945 agrarian reform was reflected in the expansion of the socialist agricultural sector, which received more than 20 percent of the land in the agrarian reform fund.⁸⁴

Translated by *Elizabeth Salmore*

ARCHIVAL SOURCES:

Archive of Yugoslavia (referred to in the text as AJ)

Marshal of Yugoslavia's office – KMJ

FPRY government council for agriculture and forestry – SPŠ

Agricultural reform and colonization commission – UARK

Presidency of the FPRY Government – PV FNRJ

Đuro Đaković Party College – VPŠ

LEGISLATIVE SOURCES:

Official Journal of the DFJ (1945)

Official Gazette of the FNRJ (1945–1948)

REFERENCES:

Babić, B. 'Nepravilan rad narodnih odbora', *Narodna država*, 1, 1946, 102–113. (Serbian Cyrilic)

Bakarić, V. *O poljoprivredi i problemima sela*, Beograd: Kultura, 1960.

Begović, V. 'Put socijalističkog preobražaja poljoprivrede pod rukovodstvom KPJ', u: *Materijali za ideološki odgoj*, Zagreb: Ognjen Prica, 1949, 275–291.

Bokovoy, M. *Peasants and Communists: politics and ideology in the Yugoslav countryside, 1941–1953*, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Press, 1998.

Božić, Lj. *Agrarna politika*, Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1974.

Burzevski, V., Goranović, M. *Petogodišnji plan razvitka naše poljoprivrede i zadaci omladine*, Beograd: Novo pokolenje, 1947. (Serbian Cyrilic)

Čalić, D. *Politička ekonomija socijalizma*, Zagreb: Informator, 1959.

Erić, M., *Agrarna reforma u Jugoslaviji: 1918–1941. god.*, Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1958.

Gačeša, N. *Agrarna reforma u Jugoslaviji 1945–1948*, Novi Sad: Matica Srpska, 1984.

Gudac-Dodić, V. *Agrarna politika FNRJ i seljaštvo u Srbiji 1948–1953*, Beograd: INIS, 1999. (Serbian Cyrilic)

Isić, M. *S narodom, za narod, o narodu. Sreten Vukosavljević*, Beograd: INIS, 2012. (Serbian Cyrilic)

Janjetović, Z. *Deca careva, pastorčad kraljeva. Nacionalne manjine u Jugoslaviji 1918–1941*, Beograd: INIS, 2005.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Bakarić 1960: 64; Čalić 1959: 75.

⁸⁴ Mirković 1950: 43.

- Kidrič B. *Sabrana dela*, IV, Beograd: Kultura, 1985a.
- _____. *Sabrana dela*, V, Beograd: Kultura, 1985b.
- Klein, G., Klein, P. 'Land reform in Yugoslavia: two models', in: I. Volgyes (ed.), *The Peasantry of Eastern Europe: 20th century developments*, New York: Pergamon Press, 1979, 25–38.
- Lekić, B. *Agrarna reforma i kolonizacija u Jugoslaviji*, Beograd: Arhiv Jugoslavije, 1997. (Serbian Cyrilic)
- Lenin, V. I. 'The Agrarian Programme of Social-Democracy in the First Russian Revolution, 1905–1907', in: *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 13, Moscow: Progress Publisher, 1972.
- Marx, K., Engels, F. *Dela*, 25, 1972.
- Mates, L. *Međunarodni odnosi Jugoslavije*, Beograd: Nolit, 1976.
- Milošević, S. 'Promene u agrarnoj strukturi izazvane raseljavanjem stanovništva na prostoru Jugoslavije u toku drugog svetskog rata', u: V. Jovanović, *Tradicija i transformacija: političke i društvene promene u Srbiji i Jugoslaviji u 20. veku: zbornik radova*, 1, 2015b, 253–279.
- _____. 'Komunistička partija Jugoslavije o seljačkom i agrarnom pitanju u periodu između dva svetska rata', *Tokovi istorije*, 2, 2015a, 101–127. (Serbian Cyrilic)
- _____. *Agrarna politika u Jugoslaviji (1945–1953)*, Beograd: Filozofski fakultet [neobjavljena doktorska disertacija], 2016. (Serbian Cyrilic)
- Mirković, M. *Ekonomika agrara FNRJ*, Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Hrvatske, 1950.
- Nešović, S. *Rad zakonodavnih odbora Predsedništva antifašističkog veća narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije i privremene Narodne skupštine DFJ : (3 aprila-25 oktobra 1945) : po stenografskim beleškama i drugim izvorima*, Beograd: Prezidijum Narodne skupštine FNRJ, 1952.
- Petranović, B. *Politička i ekonomska osnova narodne vlasti u Jugoslaviji za vreme obnove*, Beograd: ISI, 1969.
- _____. *Istorija Jugoslavije*, 2, Beograd: Prosveta, 1988.
- Pijade, M., *Izabrani spisi*, 2, Beograd: Institut za izučavanje radničkog pokreta, 1965.
- Radaković, J. *Naša poljoprivreda i njeni problemi*, Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1953. (Serbian Cyrilic)
- Radić, R., *Država i verske zajednice 1945–1970*, 1, Beograd: INIS, 2002. (Serbian Cyrilic)
- Rašić, P. *Agricultural development in Yugoslavia*, Beograd: s. n., 1955.
- Stipetić, V. *Agrarna reforma i kolonizacija u FNRJ godine 1945.–1948.*, Zagreb: JAZU, 1954.
- Šuvar, S. KPJ i seljačko pitanje, *Naše teme*, 13, 1969, 1012–1025.
- Tai, Hung-chao, *Land Reform and Politics: A Comparative Analysis*, London: Oxford, 1974.
- Tito, Broz, J. *Izgradnja nove Jugoslavije*, 1, Beograd: Kultura, 1948.
- _____. *Govori i članci*, IV, Zagreb: Naprijed, 1959.
- United Nations, *Progress in Land Reform*, Third Report, New York; UN, 1962.
- Vučković, M. 'Agrarna reforma', u: *Materijal za izučavanje agrarne politike FNRJ*, Beograd, 1954, 37–45. (Serbian Cyrilic)
- Warriner, D. *Land Reform in Principle and Practice*, Oxford, 1969.
- V Kongres KPJ. Stenografske beleške*, Beograd: Kultura, 1948. (Serbian Cyrilic)

СРЂАН МИЛОШЕВИЋ
Универзитет Унион, Правни факултет
Институт за новију историју Србије, Београд

**АГРАРНА РЕФОРМА У ЈУГОСЛАВИЈИ 1945-1948:
АГРАРНО-ПОЛИТИЧКИ АСПЕКТ**

Резиме

У овом раду представљен је првенствено нормативни оквир аграрне реформе која је изведена у Југославији после Другог светског рата, у периоду од 1945. до 1948. године. Она је на законску основу постављена августа 1945. године. Аграрна реформа била је, у основи, довршетак буржоаске револуције, подразумевајући учвршћивање ситног сељачког поседа као неопходну меру и последицу територијализације сељаштва у Југославији. Та чињеница је чинила готово немогућом национализацију земље, без сукоба са социјалном основом Народноослободилачког рата – сељаштвом. Нека важна питања (попут деобе имања добијених аграрном реформом, која се фактички неминовно дешавала) била су решена тек накнадно, новим законским интервенцијама. Пракса је омогућавала да поједина лица добију и два максимума, што је феномен који није оставио довољно извора, али сведочи о својеврсној прагматичности, а можебити и недоследности у извођењу реформе. Југословенска аграрна реформа је учврстила ситни сељачки посед и свакако није помогла преласку на „следећу фазу“ револуционарне интервенције у пољопривреди односно на колективизацију.

Кључне речи: Југославија 1945–1948, аграрна реформа, савез радника и сељака, национализација.

© Faculty of Philosophy, Novi Sad, 2022

ISTRAŽIVANJA – JOURNAL OF HISTORICAL RESEARCHES 33, 136–152