

**COLLECTIVIZATION AND LABOR  
RELATIONS IN A ROMANIAN VILLAGE,  
1921-1952**

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**KOC UNIVERSITY  
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## Abstract

This study examines the ways in which the collectivization of land was experienced by a small rural community in Romania in the 1950s. Collectivization entailed a change in property regimes and the means of controlling not only the process of agricultural production, but also the distribution of its product. The process of collectivization in this period offers the opportunity to study how social change is experienced and what contributes to people's conceptions of social change when it is not of their own doing. I will argue that looking at the changes in labor practices and relations in the village starting with the distribution of land in 1921 and going all the way to 1952, when collectivization in the village was officially completed, provides new explanatory tools for understanding state-society relations. I was looking at changes in the structure of ownership, the transformation of the peasantry's status and labor practices, and the state interventions that shaped these changes in order to offer a new narrative of collectivization, one that starts with the First World War, and not with the beginning of the socialist regime in Romania. I argue that it is essential to put collectivization in this historical perspective, because the three decades that preceded the process shaped the peasantry's lives in ways that ultimately produced a particular reaction to collectivization.

Keywords:

labor practices and labor relations, collectivization of land, state-society relations, Romania, inter war period, socialism.

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# CHAPTER I:

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. INTRODUCTION OF THE ARGUMENT

I grew up in Caraseu. I still remember the buildings once belonging to the collective farms, the failed agro-business attempts, and the work in the fields. In the early to mid-nineties, after the fall of communism people got their lands back. After 40 years of working in a collective farm, villagers started working their own plots again; they became land owners and their own masters. Villagers violently dismantled the collective farm buildings in the first months of 1990. Cattle, tools, the bricks from the buildings and roofs were all taken down and taken away. The machines were sold or appropriated by the state. The agronomists and farm leaders left. The land was fragmented, and there were no serious attempts to form associations to work the land collectively. At the same time, many of the villagers retired and started getting pensions from the state. The frenetic working of the land, still done as 50 years before with cattle and horses, non-mechanized tools, and focused on intensive work rather than mechanization, yielded poor results. Subsidized by the state through the pension system, subsistence agriculture

became the norm in the village. As my grandparents did, many of the villagers were working the land with extreme dedication, mobilizing the whole family and their resources to pay for the seeds, the taxes, and for the hiring of machines for certain jobs. Most of them were losing money and were producing just enough to feed the extended family. Many of them gave up doing that as they grew older.

The state of the lands in the village is a source of unhappiness amongst the older generations. They still remember how the lands were worked and they were lost just to be regained after 40 years. A study of the memory of collectivization done twenty years ago would have produced different results than one done nowadays. There are many leitmotifs throughout my interviews that are worth mentioning, but one that stands out is the preference for the collective farm over the current situation. Most villagers if not explicitly declare that working the land on the collective farm was superior to the present situation, in which the lands are abandoned or produce little yield; they at least mention how in spite of all the hardship of giving up the land and working on the farm, the fact that the lands were worked was comforting.

This study is not about memory or collectivization per se, but regards historical change as experienced in Caraseu, between 1918 and 1952, during a period of territorial and economic restructuring, political turmoil, and war. In the post World War I years the modern Romanian state was formed by receiving the territories of Transylvania, Bukovina, Bessarabia and parts of Dobrogea. Immediately after, the state started to integrate the territories, pushed for a land reform that would distribute 2 million hectares of land to the peasantry, while trying to develop the national industry. I will try to show

how by extending the period of analysis from the beginning of the socialist regime to the beginning of the Romanian modern state in 1918, the perspective on the collectivization process changes as it is integrated in a longer process of state-building, industrialization, and proletarianization of the peasantry. I will argue that looking at the changes in labor practices and relations in the village starting with the distribution of land in 1921 and going all the way to 1952, when collectivization in the village was officially completed, provides new explanatory tools for understanding state-society relations. Although the focus is on the collectivization of land in the village taking place between 1949 and 1952 and on the reactions of the villagers to the process of transferring land from private ownership to state ownership, the time frame that I find relevant for the explanation includes the three decades preceding the collectivization. This time frame allowed me to integrate the collectivization process into a new historical dimension that does not start with the beginning of the socialist regime in Romania, but in an earlier period, when the Romanian state accelerated its integration into the world market, when the state sponsored the development of industry and when the peasantry became more exposed to market mechanism because of their status as landowners. I will draw parallels between this period of accelerated integration into the market (including the 1920s and the 1930s), and the beginning of the socialist regime with collectivization of land (starting with 1945 and ending in 1952 in Caraseu) in order to show how similar processes changed the way the peasantry worked the land, provided for themselves and their families, and changed the way they related to their work. I will show in the following section what research tools I used to develop my theoretical arguments and what are their strong points and weaknesses.

## 2. RESEARCH SITE AND RESEARCH METHODS

By keeping the research at a micro level I was able to incorporate personal and collective experiences alike into the study of states and their subjects. Memories of collectivization have been extensively explored during my research. The main research techniques used for this study consist of structured and unstructured interviews and archival research. I started by conducting a series of unstructured interviews in the first stage of the fieldwork in order to identify the main themes important to my informants. Thus, the benefits of asking broader questions in the first stage of the research in order to examine the main themes recurrent in the villagers' stories surpassed the danger of drifting away from my initial interests. I started my research in Caraseu in June 2011. The village, situated in the North Western part of Romania, is part of the county of Satu Mare and is incorporated in the Culciu Mare commune. The village is an ethnically mixed enclave built on the shore of the river Someș, thus having relatively fertile lands when compared with other parts of the county. Hungarians and Romanians form most of the population, set at around 1200-1300 people nowadays. Some Roma families live on the outskirts of the village. The population of the village is getting older and a distinct feeling of somnolence and stillness sometimes covers the subtle changes acknowledged by the locals. More houses are empty as more people pass away or move away. Many of their lands are deserted, because they cannot work them anymore and their children cannot afford to invest in machines in order to work the land. The main source of income in the village is the state and the pensions or the social security it delivers every month to young and old alike. There are few jobs available in the area and most of them are in the

city. A few commuters take minibuses to Satu Mare every day for salaries of 150 EUR per month or slightly more. Each household has a garden and many families still keep chickens, pigs, and cows in order to provide for their families. The sense of desolation was present in every interview I took from the villagers, and there was no one who did not mention the abandonment of the fields.

I interviewed 14 people in the village, of whom 9 were men and 5 were women; 8 were Romanians and 6 were Hungarians, two of them were school teachers, two used to own the local store before collectivization and later became administrators of the same grocery store, when it was taken over by the farm, and the rest were agriculturalists. They had different jobs in the farm, ranging from agricultural laborers, tractor drivers, security guards, and milkers. None of them came from rich peasant families and none of their family members were *chiaburi*<sup>1</sup>. The interviews were taken individually and sometimes in groups of two or three. I took extended and repeated interviews with some informants because they were older and had more information on the decades previous to the collectivization of land. I also invited spouses when possible, as I noticed that some of my informants felt more comfortable in a dialog about the period and in a situation where they would be able to double check some of the facts they were narrating. A preoccupation with veracity was very present, and some of my informants confessed they felt intimidated by the recorder, because they might not remember things exactly as they were and I would record them “telling lies”. For them the history of the village and of collectivization, as with all history in general, should be as accurate as humanly possible.

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<sup>1</sup>Rich peasants persecuted by the state as enemies of the people; the equivalent of kulaks in Soviet Russia

History in their understanding is what truly happened. It is the truth; and when they were summoned to tell it, many reacted with insecurity and humility. What opened up the discussion was the invitation to tell personal stories and family stories. I was invited on several occasions to go and check the archives. Many villagers were reassured, when I told them I was already doing so.

The research I have done in the Satu Mare archives went in parallel with the interviews and were conducted between June and September 2011. Additionally, I spent two more weeks in January 2012 to complete the archival research, after analyzing part of the data collected during the summer. The earliest document collected dates from 1923 and the latest from 1951. My sources consist of correspondence, field reports, and investigations of the local Department for Agriculture between 1923 and 1948, correspondence and field reports of the local Communist Party between 1945 and 1951, and newspaper articles from the local Romanian weekly *Ziarul Satu Mare*<sup>2</sup> from 1922 to 1936. The limited internet research I have done provided me with information about the faith of some of the main actors of my story. As much as possible I tried to corroborate data from overlapping periods. The inter-war period is better covered by archival sources and the local paper, while the post-war period is mostly documented by interviews and correspondence between Party members and local institutions.

One example would be the way in which I explored the prevalence and interest in collective work before collectivization. While the local paper, which was affiliated with

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<sup>2</sup>*Ziarul Satu Mare* (Satu Mare Newspaper) was published between 1923 and 1936 first as a biweekly paper, published on Wednesdays and Sundays and after 1930 as a weekly paper published every Sunday.

the Peasants Party and was an avid promoter of agricultural cooperatives, offered considerable space to the promotion of work in cooperatives throughout its activity (between 1923 and 1936), of mechanization and of rationalized work practices, the correspondence of the local Department of Agriculture for the same period related to the village mentions no such organizations in Caraseu. There are no records of cooperatives before 1949, when the first agricultural association was inaugurated in the village. The interviews cover mostly the period after the 1930s, as my interviewees were in the best case small children before that. I relied heavily on the archival material and the local newspaper in order to reconstitute the events following the land reform of 1921. Only two of my informants had any knowledge of what was arguably the biggest land reform in Romania in the twentieth century. Other aspects of village life, such as the relations between landlords and villagers, inter-ethnic groups, and attitudes towards different types of labor, were covered in my interviews or were extrapolated from newspaper articles and archival material.

Evidence from the archives as well as from my informants' narratives reflects not an objective reality but one constructed by experience, historical events, and time. Most of my informants are well into their seventies and eighties, and their stories are being told sixty years after they happened, when they are retired and have in many ways given up on their land and on some of their memories. Agency is embedded in the narrative, but only after it is shaped by norms, practices, institutions, and discourses. I would add to this, the lenses of the present, which for many of my informants might give a grayer shade to the past. All of these elements should reveal many valuable sources of analysis; however, they might also obstruct other paths of understanding. An understanding of potential

silences and their function in narratives and specifically in this narrative would help in making sense of the “pick and choose” process of remembering. Archival sources present challenges of their own but could reveal a great deal on the inner workings of a system if treated properly. Indeed, they are biased and sometimes unreliable, but in very intriguing ways, precisely because they are the remnants of systems, and could very well be the maps to decipher them. Their value does not stand only in the information they store, but in the selective information they have kept. Again, in the same way as narratives, archives can be very misleading. Beforehand preparation in understanding what institutions preserved their documents, what was their role in the network of state institutions, and who managed their preservation is essential in assessing the information they store, because, as Dirks ( 2002:58) points out, archives are “a discursive formation in the totalizing sense that it reflects the categories and operations of the state itself”. Thus, combining structured and unstructured interviews with archival work did not only allow me to gather information from different sources, but it also created the opportunity to reflect on the type of knowledge the sources preserve.

The limits of my research have to do with both the actual fieldwork and the tools I have used to make sense of it. Although I am searching for answers to broad questions related to social change and state-society relation, I am looking to find some answers in a small rural community in Transylvania. Case studies have the advantage of providing more detailed data and the opportunity to in depth examination, but they often pose problems, when it comes to extracting broader conclusions. Even if my research cannot speak to all researches done on states, I believe it will contribute to the existing literature



on the socialist states in Eastern Europe. The secondary literature on the subject is vast, thus allowing the opportunity to compare cases and inspire new questions.

### 3. THESIS STRUCTURE

In the First chapter of my thesis I will present the conceptual tools and theoretical approach I used to develop and propose an argument about the way in which collectivization was experienced by the villagers of Caraseu and how their experiences are relevant for a broader understanding of state-society relations and historical change. I propose here to look at labor relations and labor practices as lenses through which historical processes are analyzed and narrated. I will argue that labor is a way through which states and relations with states can be experienced by people, as labor is a fundamental part of people's and communities' lives.

In the Second chapter “The Land Reform of 1918-1921” I will give a brief historical background of Transylvania before the First World War, and I will describe in detail the context in which the land reform on 1921 was conducted and the impact the reform had on the economy and social organization of the country. Furthermore, I will give an account of the implementation of the reform in Caraseu and I will show what consequences it had for the locals.

The Third chapter “Land, Labor and State in Interwar Romania” is the first major analytical chapter of my thesis and it analyzes the impact of changes in the structure of property on agricultural production in the country, the effects of state reforms and economic policy on the labor relations at a micro-level, and documents instances of loss

of control over labor and livelihood that the peasantry of Caraseu experienced in this period.

The Fourth and last chapter “Collectivization in Caraseu” presents the establishment of the socialist regime in Romania in the aftermath of the Second World War, the impact the land reform had on the reception of the socialist regime in the countryside and the establishment of the collective farm in Caraseu. I will point out in this last chapter the parallels with the post World War I period and will argue that the socialist state confronted some similar problems in the countryside to those of the Romanian state in the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, I will show how the villagers in Caraseu experienced the establishment of the collective farm and how they translated their experience in terms of changes in labor practices and labor relations.

After the theory chapter, the thesis is structured in a chronological order because it aims at showing how the processes that I am following developed in time. For each chapter there will be a section allocated to discussions of labor relations in the field. I will present in the following chapter my theoretical and conceptual tools, as well as the literature that contributed to my understanding of collectivization in Caraseu.

# CHAPTER II:

## THEORETICAL INTERESTS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

I will discuss in this chapter the conceptual tools and theoretical interests that shaped my research and its results, as well as the literature that contributed to my understanding of labor, land, and collectivization in this small community. I will finish by giving an outline of the main arguments that I will present in the following chapters. I started my research in a village in north-western Transylvania and my main research questions focused on the ways in which the collectivization of land was experienced by this small community in the early 1950s. The collectivization of land in this period offers the opportunity to study how social change is experienced and what contributes to people's conceptions of social change when it is not of their own doing. My assumption was that the collectivization of land was imposed by an authoritarian state and no peasant in the village would have even conceived or approved of such a project unless intimidated and coerced. However, I heard of no riot, revolt, or active and open opposition to the establishment of the local collective farm in Caraseu. I was interested in understanding what the experience of my villagers from Caraseu can tell us about relations between peasant communities and a socialist authoritarian state during the process of restructuring the economic and political system.

I will argue that looking at the changes in labor practices and relations in the village starting with the distribution of land in 1921 and going all the way to 1952, when collectivization in the village was officially completed, provides new explanatory tools for understanding state-society relations. I will look at the Romanian state's economic policies in both the interwar period and in the early years of the socialist regime. I will show how there were continuities in terms of economic policies such as land distribution and industrial production that can be better understood in the conceptual frame of primitive capitalist accumulation and primitive socialist accumulation. The first concept developed by Marx (1976) describes a process of separation of producers from their means of production, as in the case of the peasantry who loses their land in favor of the emerging capitalist classes and needs to migrate to the city to sell their labor. Primitive socialist accumulation is a stage in the development of socialism described by Yevgeni Preobrazhensky (1926) in the “New Economic Policy” that allows for the state to intervene and shift surpluses from the countryside to the city, by appropriating land from the peasantry and by integrating the agriculture into the socialist economy. Both processes need the intervention of the state to facilitate and legitimize the process. Moreover, both in primitive capitalist accumulation as in primitive socialist accumulation the peasantry loses its economic autonomy and resorts to selling its labor.

How do these macro-economic scenarios influence the reaction of the peasants from Caraseu to the establishment of the socialist regime in Romania and that of the collective farm in the village? The answer lies in the labor practices and labor relation developing within these economic systems. Material production is in this case a mediator between community and state. Following a classic Marxist argument, Martha Lampland

(1995) argues, “The process of producing one's material existence was whereby one created social community. This was a process without end, a ceaseless project of material creation and social realization” (Lampland, 44:1995). Thus, I will use labor, because of its centrality “as the distinguishing feature of social identity and economic practice” (Lampland, 1995:36) in order to understand historical processes and social change.

## 2. PRIMITIVE CAPITALIST ACCUMULATION VERSUS PRIMITIVE SOCIAL-IST ACCUMULATION

In “What was Socialism and What comes next?” Kathrine Verdery (1996) analyzes in detail the Romanian socialist economic system in comparison with the capitalist system. She claims that as much as the Romanian state was interested in accumulation and extraction of surplus, its internal logic was very much different from the logic of a capitalist system. Socialism had as its main mantra the accumulation of resources (not of profit) and the accumulation of means of production. The point was never to sell things, but to make full use of resources. Her analysis of socialism has, as a starting point, the appropriation of surplus specific to a socialist mechanism. The rationality of maximizing resources and taking them under the control of the apparatus was especially effective with the accumulation of resources that could create new types of resources, like heavy industry. While a focus on consumer industry would allow the products to fall into the hands of the consumer, heavy industry created products that remained under the state’s control. Power emanated from the function of owning the capacity of distribution or the power to allocate (not necessarily the amounts to be allocated). As Verdery explains, socialism’s main function was to “maximize allocative

capacity and control over means of production but the subjective aim of at least some bureaucrats and enterprise managers some of the time was to maximize production of a disposable surplus” (1991:82).

The centralized planning system had problems related to shortages of material, changes in the quotas, unreliable data; all leading to an economy of barter and shortages. Unlike in capitalism systems where the competition of companies is focused on profit and accumulation of capital, in barter economies firms compete for supplies. Campeanu (1990) describes this as a management-ownership relation, where the center owns the means of production but the managers exert pressure to increase resource allocation. When these demands are not satisfied the pressure of a freer market arises, where an increase in the lateral distribution of resources would replace the vertical one. Thus, the control logic was subverted from inside the bureaucratic system. Efficiency was not understood like in a capitalist system in the form of making the most use of resources in order to extract profit, but as a full use of resources (Campeanu, 1986). The rationality is different in the two systems and, obviously, the behavior of actors within the two rationalities is different. Verdery's (1991) definition of socialism recognizes the process of accumulation of resources in the state's hand; however, the distinction she makes between the ownership of the means of production and ownership of resources is not clear. If we look at the collectivization of land at the beginning of the regime, we see that although the state was not the formal owner of the land, it controlled de facto the production process, the distribution of the products and the labor force employed. The logic behind the process of production in a collective farm was to extract profit, to keep

the farm with its workers functioning, to employ the surplus to feed the cities and to develop the industry.

Thus, I will argue that socialism functioned as a commodity-centered mode of production in the hands of the state (Krausz, 2005). Here the state was the owner of capital, because it controlled the production process, the accumulation and the distribution of its products. The distinction is important as it shows how, in terms of extraction of surplus from the countryside, the Romanian interwar economic mode of production and the socialist mode of production shared a similar logic. The similar logic was one in which the producers are being separated from the means of production or the process of separating the peasants from their land in this case (Stahl, 1980). Marx (1976) uses the term primitive socialist accumulation for the expropriation “of the many by the few in the formation of capitalist relations of production” (Marx cited in Krausz, 786:2005). Stahl (1980) argues that this process started in the eighteenth and nineteenth century in Romania; however, I would argue that with the distribution of land in 1921 this process was slowed down, just to be picked up again when the interwar liberal government stepped up the program of industrialization. In 1945, yet again private property and the economic autonomy of the peasantry got a push with the land reform, but the separation of land and peasant was eventually finalized with the collectivization of land.

Yevgeni Preobrazhensky (1926) defined in the “The New Economics” the ‘primitive socialist accumulation’ as the state’s takeover of the resources and means of production in the country so as to gain not only political advantage, but also economic

superiority over capitalism. This accumulation was important especially in the countryside, where a “scientific reconstruction of the state economy” was needed (Preobrazhensky cited in Krausz, 2005). The term was inspired by Marx’s “primitive capitalist accumulation,” which he used to describe a stage in the development of capitalism, when the producers were being separated from their means of productions, as in the case of the enclosure movement in England, when peasants lost control over their land and they were forced out of their traditional source of production. The state at this stage played an important role: that of assisting the ruling classes in the process of accumulation by using force and creating legislation in order to legitimize the process. In primitive socialist accumulation the state played an equally or even more important role, because it extracted the surplus, but was also the main beneficiary of the profit. More generally, this process signified in Soviet Russia the way in which the country was industrialized, by using the surplus extracted from agriculture in order to finance the state's main project, namely industrialization. By industrializing the country the Soviet State aimed to achieve a degree of independence from the more powerful industrialized countries (Krausz, 2005). Using the Soviet blueprint somehow against the Soviets’ will (Jowitt, 1971), Romania also embarked on the path of industrialization, because industrialization meant a larger degree of autonomy and self-sustainability. The Soviet model of development was, as Kilgman and Verdery (2011) call it, a blue print for the socialist satellite states established in Eastern Europe. Krausz (2005) argues that the socialist alternative as portrayed by the Soviet Union was the symbol of a new world order in the 1920s, but also a practical alternative to the Western model of capitalism and parliamentary democracy. In the 1920s and 1930s the main concern of the newly



established state was to surpass capitalism and match the economic and military power of capitalist countries. Internally, the new state needed to alleviate poverty in order to gain legitimacy for the new system. Ideally, socialism needed to function without a state structure, which in Marx's (1976) terms was just a tool in the hands of the economic elite. The party leadership, however, thought voluntarism, cooperatives and the abolition of private property could not be achieved spontaneously, and therefore the existence of a strong state was justified by the need to protect an incipient, fragile socialism. Ideologically and economically, socialism needed to be reinterpreted and it was defined as a commodity-centered mode of production controlled by the state; thus private property was considered abolished.

### 3. ECONOMIC AUTONOMY OF THE PEASANTRY

*“For Dej, the crux of the problem was the economic autonomy of individual private farmers, who “could influence the marketplace and determine the course of prices, regardless of what we, with our decrees, our circulars, and our instructions, did.” “As long as agriculture remained private, Dej concluded, the peasants would use their badly needed produce to dictate their will to the state. ‘How do you fix prices for eggs or for milk,” he demanded, “when the hen is no longer laying eggs and the cow is no longer giving milk? Regulating is practically impossible with this extensive distribution of individual peasant farms. I beg you to try to regulate this individualized economy that is so dispersed!”*

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The economic autonomy of the peasantry posed major problems for both the interwar Romanian state, as for the socialist regime. Not accidentally, both regimes

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<sup>3</sup>in (Levy, 2001:112)

started their reign with extensive land reforms that increased the amount of land in the hands of the peasantry and fragmented the big estates. Right after the war the Romanian state needed to reform agriculture, for fears of upheavals were not uncommon after the 1907 peasant uprising. The integration of new territories after WWI pushed for constitutional, administrative, and economic reforms. The socialist regime, established officially in 1948 with the Soviet Army still stationed on Romanian territory, disassembled the big landlords' estates and distributed more than two million hectares to the small peasantry. Although counter-intuitive for a regime set to dissolve private property, the move aimed at destroying the political and economic power of the big landlords. Also party elites such as Ana Pauker, the Minister for Agricultural Affairs, and other members of the Communist Party's Central Comity believed that the move would increase the regime's legitimacy in a country where the Soviet collectivization process and the fashion in which it was carried out was not unknown ( Levy, 2001).

The Land Reform of 1921 prescribed the distribution of a considerable amount of land to the peasantry. At the end of the reform 5.8 million hectares had been distributed to around 1.4 million peasants. Peasants owning 10 hectares or less now owned around 60% of the Romanian land (Shabates-Wheeler, 2005). If previously the land was monopolized in the hands of the landowning elite, the new arrangement created a consistent class of small landholders, with more economic autonomy. Increased landownership transformed the peasantry. From a near serfdom condition (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910), under which the peasants were dependent on the landlord to secure an income, they were promised to become more independent and more self-sustaining. The reform aimed not only at empowering and appeasing the peasantry, but, according to

Roberts (1951), the distribution of land was supposed to facilitate the creation of a class of consuming middle peasants ready to invest in industrial products and finance the country's emerging industry. However, the land came with problems for both the state and the peasantry. Indebtedness in the countryside was rampant, and the level of production the peasants were able to sustain with old tools and inappropriate credit options was very low. After 1918 the major economic trend in the country was commercialization without development (Verdery, 1983). Verdery (1983) argues that although the economy of the country opened up more to international markets and the levels of exports increased, the level of technological advancement or land-working techniques did not follow the same upward track. Most of the increase in agricultural output was still due to more work-intensive practices than to technical improvements. Moreover, the state became increasingly involved in peasants' lives through land distribution, taxation, and price fixing. Because of the lack of a strong national bourgeoisie, the state took over the traditional role of the bourgeoisie and sponsored economically and politically the industrialization of the country (Verdery, 1983).

The patronage of the state over industry meant increased intervention of the state towards shifting capital from the countryside towards the financing of national industry. However, due to a series of factors such as the fragmentation of land after the reform, less sophisticated tools and land working techniques, and bad credit options for the peasantry (Roberts, 1951); the output of the agricultural production fell during the first post-war decade. There were not enough yields to sell, to export or to create surplus for the peasantry to invest in the emerging industry. The economic autonomy of the peasant, as little as it was, infringed upon the state's plans of building an autonomous state based on a

national industry. Subsistence agriculture threatened this project and the interwar Romanian state struggled to find ways of extracting more from the countryside. These mechanisms of extraction and the way in which they defined the macro-economic field within which the peasantry was working will show how not only market mechanisms and property regimes, but also state projects changed the labor relations in the village. The socialist state was confronted with a similar problem after allocating even more land in 1945. The private plots posed a serious economic and political problem to a newly established regime, which sought to destroy private property and industrialize the country even more so. The socialists followed the Soviet model of nationalizing the land and establishing units of agro-industrial production, known as collective farms. The little autonomy the peasantry was offered immediately after the World War II was taken away in less than fifteen years.

In both cases the economic autonomy of the peasantry posed a threat to the state and the economic establishment of the time. In the inter war period the state used economic reform and fiscal policy to shift capital from the peasants to the working classes and the industry-owners by allowing for practices such as price scissoring to devalue the price of agricultural products, while maintaining high prices for industrial products. This meant that the workers could buy cheap food in the cities and were able to afford these food products from their wages, while the factory owners maintained wages at a low level and sold their products at high prices. At the beginning of the socialist regime the state intervened brutally and simply abolished any form of formal economic autonomy in the countryside. This again allowed the state to control the production and the prices of food going to the cities, but in this case also allowed for the control of the

distribution of food. A steady supply of food was essential for gaining political support in the cities from the working and controlling the development of the industry.

#### 4. LABOR

What the primitive socialist accumulation of capital meant for the peasants was described by Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej during a meeting of the Council of Ministers in 1948, the year collectivization was launched officially in Romania:

*“We can’t speak to our peasantry of a so-called equilibrium between the prices of industrial goods and agricultural produce. . . . We want to achieve a socialist accumulation at the expense of the capitalist elements in the countryside: to siphon it off from [them] and put it in the industrial sector.” (Gheorghiu-Dej, cited in Levy, 2001).*

The peasantry was then seen as an economic resource ready to finance the industry and feed the country (Viola, 1996). Kideckel (1993) argues that labor was central in the state-society relations within the socialist state as an immediate struggle started between the state and the villagers over the control of time, resources and human energy that shaped social relations, but also values and attitudes towards the state and socialism. If collectivization was needed to support the development of the industry, it was done on the back of the countryside, and it changed in the process the way people worked and the way they related and gave meaning to their labor. Lampland (1995) argues that collectivization and industrialization substantially altered the work experience with the hierarchical organization of modern management, temporal boundaries, wage tasks, hourly segments, welfare benefits, and work unions. She acknowledges that

villagers might have been already accustomed to these features while working for their landlords prior to the establishment of the socialist regime; however, her main argument is that although capitalism was underway in the 1930s (in Hungary), the socialist state was the one that accomplished the full commodification of the peasantry's labor.

As Lampland argues for Hungary, I will argue that the commodification of the peasantry's labor was already under way in Caraseu in the 1920s and the 1930s, and it reached its completion with collectivization. The commodification of the peasants' labor under socialism meant not just the loss of control over their work, their time and over the product of their work, but it entailed a new way of relating to people in the community and a new way of understanding one's relation to work. In the same way, during the interwar period attitudes towards work done outside the household changed. Owning land and a private plot was no longer enough to support a family and soon the land-hungry villagers resorted to external work in order to supplement their income. Wage labor for the local landlord was seen as a sign of prestige and daily and seasonal work done another person's estate was not frowned upon because “everybody did it”. The only really shameful thing was not to want to work: “only those who don't want to work starve”<sup>4</sup>. The role of the employee was not new for many of these peasants, and the attitudes they developed during the decades prior to collectivization influenced the reception of their new role as agricultural workers.

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<sup>4</sup>Interview SV, Male, 78, Retired

Ingold (2000) makes the distinction between pre-industrial labor and capitalist labor in terms of the division between the domains of work and social life. Pre-industrial labor was task oriented, the activities were carried out by people not machines, and one learnt while practicing with other hands. The work was defined in terms of outcomes and it gave the person their social identity. In capitalist forms of production there is a distinction between living and working, as the product of one's work is appropriated by the owners of capital. Because the power to decide their task, their time and the products of their work does not belong to them, workers in capitalism are not agents, they are alienated from their work, and their labor can be bought and sold like a commodity. Labor becomes here extrinsic to social relations. The process of alienation, the changes in attitudes towards employed labor, and the absence of a system of acquisition of status based solely on task-oriented labor were symptoms of a phenomenon that was present in the interwar period in Romania. A process of commodification of labor was intensifying with the increased employment of the peasants in the city and in the service of the landlord, but attitudes towards waged labor were not negative.

It is important to remember that as opposed the Romanian Kingdom where the peasantry staged a bloody revolt in 1907, the memory of which still loomed over the political class in 1918, the peasants of Northern Transylvania received land from a newly established state with which they were connected through huge amounts of debt. The land they received was mortgaged; the credit they took was a chain tying them to the state and in Caraseu to the landlord. The level of economic autonomy was still greater than before the reform, but it was not really accomplished. With fluctuating prices for grains, poor tools, increasing need for cash and indebtedness, the peasants were thrown into market

and fiscal games of which in many occasions they had little knowledge and even less control over their outcomes. At the same time, other forms of employment became available in the city as workers in the administration and as sharecroppers for the state. All of these experiences in the post-World War I period shaped people's expectations, values and attitudes towards work, which eventually also influenced their perception of collectivization. I will show in the following section why states shape the experience of work for peasants and how in exchange the way people work and earn a living can explain how they experience the state and regime change.

## 5. STATE AND COLLECTIVIZATION

Ranging from systemic analysis of the socialist regimes (Campeanu 1986, 1990) to historical analysis of the state's development (Scott, 1998), the socialist state has been analyzed not only as a structure that was imposed on societies but one that created a specific kind of society (Fitzgerald, 1986). Campeanu (1986) develops the concept of "syncretic societies" for Stalinist social systems, and brings into the discussion economic, social, and cultural elements as empirical data to support his analysis. He portrays in this work and "Origins of Stalinism" a social system formed by various incompatible subsystems, held in place by an authoritarian regime. He analyses class structures, modes of production and cultural practices of these "syncretic societies" and challenges their "socialist" character. The state, in his approach, is part of the system, but governs a series of subsystems incompatible with each other. Katherine Verdery (1983) defines the state as an organization or a cluster of organizations in a society, "whose agents sought to increase its capacity to manage and maintain order within a home territory, through a



variety of subsidiary organs, and 'to compete with similar entities abroad in a number of ways, militarily and economically in particular' (1983:4). For the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, Verdery treats the state as conceptually different from other actors, with whom it is in a permanent competition for resources, but later the state becomes just relatively autonomous from its dominant classes and their interests. "As a form the state is a piece of social technology which large numbers of groups in society would like to access; the particular constellation of groups that enjoy privileged access to it at any one time makes up a regime" (1983:7). State structures in the case of these two authors are somehow integrated into a greater social system, but do keep a level of autonomy and are distinct by the level of power they can exert over societies. They are dominant structures that shape the subsystems of a society. Moreover, they analyze state structures of different types of regimes as entities separate from each other. Although I do recognize this distinction I would add that there is not always a very clear cut difference between states structures of different regimes. In many of the interviews and discussions I had with the villagers of Caraseu "the state" was a somewhat generic term used to refer to inter-war, socialist, and present day structures. Again, I am not arguing that there are no distinctions or that the villagers did not perceive the difference between different regimes, but that "the state" is used as a generic term in many instances because many of the experiences peasants have even with different types of states are similar in terms of power relations, modes of extraction and interaction with their administration.

In a slight change of perspective, Kligman and Verdery (2011) make a synthesis of their previous work on collectivization and the peasantry in Romania, and propose an analysis of the state, property, personhood and memory that emerges from their

experience in the field, calling it a “historical ethnography of state creation”. They argue that collectivization was part of a modernizing process that included mass education, public health, and industrialization and that this process not only shaped the people exposed to it primarily, meaning the peasants, but also the Party and the socialist state. Collectivization changed people’s relation with the state, with themselves and their community. It was a process of becoming through which people were thrown into new property relations that changed their relation with themselves and with other people in their community. However, it was also the first big state project of the socialist state, which changed a weak party into the ultimate ruler. The Communist Party developed institutionally through a process of negotiation between directions and implementation, and through new technologies of power and governance. Collectivization, they claim, was the process through which the socialist state was built. (Kligman, Verdery 2011): “Property is about rights and obligations, about economic access, about citizenship and political status, about social relationships, and about notions of personhood”. Thus, a new state was created and with it new subjects were born. Similar in its conclusion that the socialist system created not only new forms of governance, but also new subjects with new values and behaviors is Jowitt's (1971) analysis of national-building strategies in a Leninist society. He defines nation building as having two stages, one of breaking through, followed by political integration. He defines the breaking through phase as “the decisive alteration or destruction of values, structures, and behaviors which are perceived by a revolutionary elite as comprising or contributing to the actual or potential existence of alternative centers of political power” (7) and political integration as a “new political formula, new political institutions, and new patterns of political behavior” (7).

In a somewhat different logic of grand projects in which the state has an important role but is separated completely from society, Kotkin (1995) sees Stalinism as a new civilization and a narrative of the welfare state and an instance of “progressive modernity”, but also “ a set of values, a social identity and a way of life” (1995:23). The welfare state was here a process of forced normalization and an attempt to manage the working class by keeping them in healthy conditions, and in a state of docile reliable supply of labor. On the other hand, Viola (1996) defines collectivization as a “bloody clash between two cultures at fatal variance with one another” (1996:13) and “a war of cultures, a virtual civil war between state and peasantry, town and countryside” (1996:3). Thus, collectivization as described by Viola (1996) was a process of internal colonization of the peasantry with the aim of modernizing the countryside, turning the peasants into faithful proletarians, and assuring food and more specifically grains for the country, the army and for export. The brutal interventions of the state in the countryside led to the emergence of a culture of resistance and solidarity among the peasantry. The author claims that this was a direct reaction of a group defining itself in opposition to an entity (the socialist state) and its elites. Moreover, she argues that the divisions within the peasantry were toned down as a response to this brutal state building process. Peasants responded in violent and non-violent manners to the collectivization process, ranging from subterfuge to violent rebellion.

Collectivization and social engineering in the countryside as disasters brought about by modernization projects are another theme that connects Romanian state structures from the interwar period to the socialist state. According to Scott (1999), state and social engineering usually end up in a disaster when four conditions are met, namely,

the administrative ordering of nature and society, a high modernist ideology, an authoritarian state willing and able to use coercive power, and a weak civil society. In the social engineering of rural settlements and production the state organizes a process of civilization through which the rural settlement is reshaped and domesticated. Legibility is a precondition for this manipulation, because every state needs a visible unit. These conditions were all met, he points out, in the case of the collectivization of land in Stalin's Soviet Union. He sums it up by arguing that "the legibility of a society provides the capacity for large scale engineering, high modernist ideology provides the desire, the authoritarian state provides the determination to act on that desire, and an incapacitated civil society provides the level of social terrain on which to build" (Scott, 1999: 5) The process of standardization, ordering and legibility started in Romania before the establishment of the socialist regime as it did in Russia under the tsar. Standardization was enforced in Russia in the form of mechanization of agriculture, in terms of tools and the layout of the fields, but standardizing labor was more difficult. Standardizing nature was difficult, but forcing people into pre-made time and task units proved to require a repressive regime of great brutality in order to be achieved. If the inter-war state failed at standardizing and modernizing the countryside, the repressive power of the socialist state, the aftermath of World War II and the already servile position of the peasantry allowed for the process to reignite during socialism.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Collectivization entailed "readjustments in village socio-political life, the internal debates and contradictions, the transformation in local values, the interaction of citizens

and regional officials.” (Kideckel, 1982:326) The modernization of agriculture through mechanization and the organization of labor through the formation of collective farms were accompanied by measures that aimed at discouraging private production and at creating class divisions in villages between richer and poorer peasants. Moreover, collectivization implied a change in property regimes and the means of controlling not only the process of agricultural production, but also the distribution of its product. From a predominantly private property dominated sector, composed mainly of small and medium plots coexisting with large privately-owned estates, agriculture was converted to a collectively owned sector, but one that was at the command of the state. The restructuring of agriculture significantly altered the lives of some peasants, who in a period of twenty years lost the legal rights and the control over their own private plots, and were hired as agricultural workers in the new Cooperatives of Agricultural Production.

Somehow reversing Martha Lampland’s (1995) questions regarding the role of collectivization and the socialist state in the commodification of labor in socialist Hungary, I am asking not how collectivization changed labor practices and the value of work in a socialist regime, but how did the experience of work mediate people’s experiences with an authoritarian state, in a period of economic, social and institutional change. I will look at changes in the size of people’s property, the level of control they had over their own work, the way in which labor practices changed with increased mechanization and the introduction of new tools. I will look at the values attached to work and at different ways in which work was categorized. Working on the farm was

perceived as less valuable than working one's own plot. How did this reflect the actual material benefits coming from the different types of work people were performing?

To what extent was the position of an employee a completely new position for the villagers of Caraseu represents a major interest of my study. Although most families in the village owned land, for many of them the income and resources extracted from their private plot were not sufficient to provide a decent living. Before collectivization, they would usually supplement their income by working in the landowner's service as daily laborers or in a few cases they would find additional work in the manufacturing sector or industry. Looking for temporary jobs at the local mill, or trying to get employment in the city was not uncommon. So, was working in a collective farm an essentially new role for the peasantry. On a landowner's land peasants' labor was controlled by a higher authority as on the collective farm, and only on their small plots did they have the power of decision. Now, it would be far-fetched to claim that the state just replaced the landowner without any significant consequences or differences. However, I would argue that, although on paper the transfer of property from private to state ownership, the creation of the collective farm and the institutional changes coming with the collectivization of land were considerable, at least in the early years they altered the logic of production and peasants' work practices in ways that were familiar to them. Furthermore, I believe that this is significant because it might explain how people experienced this massive change and why collectivization did not initiate a national upheaval in Romania.

Other explanatory dimensions such as ethnicity and gender are important to understand the development of power relations in the village, but they will not be

addressed in my study. I chose to focus on labor relations and on the factors that determine material production in the village because I believe that the policies on the interwar state created more divisions through the land reform than the previous ethnic relations of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. I will show in the next chapter how these ethnic relations framed the power relations between groups in Transylvania, but also how at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century other principles of stratification such as property relations mediate people's relations with the state and with other social groups much more than ethnic origin.

In the next chapter I will introduce the historical changes that preceded the First World War and I will discuss the Land Reform of 1921 and its effects on the villagers of Caraseu.

# CHAPTER III:

## THE LAND REFORM OF 1917-1921

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Romanian land reform of 1917-1921 was among the most radical reorganizations of agricultural land in Eastern Europe of its time. The sheer amount of redistributed land was sufficiently impressive, but the attempt to create a new type of agricultural production and to change property and social relations in the process made the project even more grandiose. The topic of redistributing land from the big landowners to the peasants was discussed in the Romanian Parliament before World War I. However, this was a time when Romania, or the Romanian Kingdom, was composed of just Wallachia and Moldova. Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia were all under foreign rule and it was not until 1918 that they were united with the Romanian Kingdom. Thus, when the new agrarian law was finally passed in 1921, it affected more people than anybody could have imagined in 1914.

In the following pages I will present a brief background of the Romanian Kingdom and Transylvania with an emphasis on peasant issues. Moreover, I will illustrate the events leading to the 1921 land reform in the Romanian Participates and the way in which it impacted Transylvania after the union. I will explain how the land reform was implemented and how it changed peasants' living conditions, the social and economic



relations between them and the state, and how in the case of Transylvania it shaped their first experience with the new state. This chapter will prepare the ground for a more in-depth analysis (in the following chapter) of the effects that land policies and macro-economic changes, such as a new property structure and more exposure to market mechanisms, had on labor relations in the village.

The map below shows the historical regions of Greater Romania <sup>5</sup> and the position of Caraseu in Transylvania. This map makes the distinction between historical Transylvania (dark green) and the Partium and Maramures Region (light green), because parts of these two regions belonged to Hungary proper before the medieval region of Transylvania was incorporated into the Hungarian territory in the nineteenth century. I consider them sub-regions of Transylvania (as they are regarded today) because of the similarities in their historical, demographic and economic development.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Generic name with which the territory of 1918 Romania is referred to

<sup>6</sup> Although before the 19<sup>th</sup> century it made sense to discuss these regions as different entities because of the different regulations applied in Transylvania, Hungary and Austria, after the official incorporation of Transylvania into the Hungarian Kingdom, the few structural differences amongst these territories slowly evaporated. Moreover, the Partium and Maramures regions were, because of factors such as geographical proximity, similar ethnic, social and economic composition, historically more “Transylvanian” than “Hungarian.”

**Fig 1 Map of Greater Romania with the position of Caraseu**



## 2. THE ROMANIAN KINGDOM

In 1914, before the Great War started, Romania was a kingdom that had recently gained independence from both the Ottoman and Russian Empires, with a fresh dynasty established merely three decades earlier, and was part of an uneasy alliance with Austro-Hungary and Prussia. Transylvania and Bucovina were still under Austro-Hungarian domination, but were both claimed by Romanians as historical Romanian regions.

Bessarabia was under Russian rule. More significantly, the country was predominantly agrarian, with an impoverished peasantry, as well as a highly ambitious yet divided political and economic elite. Just seven years earlier a peasant uprising devastated the country, leaving approximately 11000 people dead<sup>7</sup> and forcing the political elite into intensive debates concerning land reform. There was a consensus regarding the need to reform an agrarian system dominated by big landowners, most of whom lived away from their estates, and populated by a dependent and indebted peasantry that was not able to produce much agricultural surplus with its rudimentary tools and farming techniques. However, the political class of the time was divided on the extent of the reform, the amount of land to be distributed and the compensation offered to the expropriated landowners. Moreover, there were different interest groups to be considered such as the big estate owners, the Church and the banking and industrial sector (Roberts, 1951).

After 1904, agrarian reforms were a source of political conflict reflecting the attitudes of political elites towards industrialization. The Liberal Party's economic platform promoted the development of the national industry, while the Conservatives wanted to protect the interests of big landowners. Prior to 1907 liberals limited their political agenda to industrial and urban areas. The Liberals' position on economic reforms and land distribution envisioned the transfer of land from the big landowners to a minority of "middle class" peasants, in order to provide an internal market for industry and to transfer more capital towards the development of factories and a local bourgeois

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<sup>7</sup> Chirot and Rangin (1975) propose this number, but because King Carol I ordered the destruction of all state documents related to the revolt it is hard to have any exact figures or data about the events. Most of the story was reproduced from personal accounts of survivors, media articles and unofficial documents such as letters.

class. Conservatives, in response to the Liberals, proposed a less radical land transfer only towards the poorest peasants and neglected the industry to a large extent, being content to provide a good marketplace for Austrian and Hungarian industries in return for a better price for cattle exports (Eidelberg 1974).

David Mitran (1930) in his extensive work on the war and the peasant question in Romania claims that the roots of these land reforms are reminiscent of a previous attempt to emancipate the Romanian peasantry from the Principalities, one dating from 1864. Although officially serfdom was abolished in the two Romanian Principalities in the eighteenth century, the peasants' conditions did not improve much. On the contrary, the fragmentation of land and the increase in duties led the peasantry into a precarious situation of dependency on the big landowners, which led some authors (Dobrogeanu-Gherea, 1910) to name this system a new type of serfdom or "the neoserfdom". Late nineteenth-century reforms aimed at emancipating the peasantry by redistributing land and eroding the huge power of a minority of big boyars (big landowners), but because of the heavy taxations on property, peasants ended up having to work for the same landowners in order to supplement their income and to assure the subsistence of their families. This new political and economic system managed to guarantee full ownership for both the boyars and the peasants, but without retaining the social obligations the boyars used to have for the communities living on their land. Many of these obligations, like the distribution of new parcels of land for newlyweds or the seasonal distribution of goods during the holidays, would prove to be vital for simultaneously keeping whole families afloat yet one step away from starvation. Moreover, many boyars retained communal land that was used by villagers for grazing and the forests that in many cases

offered the only source of fuel to warm their homes. The fragmentation of land increased as new plots were not allotted to newly formed households, but were divided by inheritance. By the outbreak of the First World War peasants in Romania were living in “second serfdom” conditions, their status close to servile status because of a lack of sufficient land, water, grazing and credit opportunities (Dobrogeanu- Gherea, 1910, Chirot, 1975). The volatile political situation that erupted in the 1907 peasant uprising was slowly being reproduced just a few years later and this encouraged a concerned ruling class to find a solution that would solve the crisis of production in agriculture, while avoiding another violent eruption in the countryside. At the same time, the political class hoped to shift the Romanian economy towards a more industrialized and prolific economic production (Chirot, 1975).

The agrarian situation in the Romanian Kingdom was on the verge of explosion before the First World War because of the precarious living conditions of the peasantry. A more ethnically divided Transylvanian peasantry was not as volatile, also because of a slightly better economic situation of the region. I will show in the following section how this region differed from the Romanian Kingdom and how historical conditions influenced the development of the peasants' land problems.

### 3. TRANSYLVANIA

Transylvania's development, though somewhat similar in economic terms to the Principalities, suffered a more unique social and regional evolution. In the early ninth century Transylvania was conquered by the Hungarian army of Stephen I, and it

remained under Hungarian domination until 1918, except for a brief 150 years of autonomy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the Ottoman Empire successfully transformed Hungary into a province of the Empire, or a pashalik. Although the scope of this thesis does not incorporate a very detailed history of the region, it is important to mention that throughout its history Transylvania did benefit from relative autonomy from the Hungarian, Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian administration. Its strong elite enjoyed privileges such as tax exemptions that were maintained well into the nineteenth century. The Transylvanian elite also had a distinct military status and these nobles were regarded as the protectors of the Hungarian state and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire, because of the region's strategic border position, which neighbored two Romanian state formations and the Russian Empire to the east. Within this context, a complex social structure developed over the centuries of particular political relations between the region and the Hungarian, Habsburg and Ottoman entities, but also within the region between the local Hungarian elite and other socio-economic groups.

Several groups coexisted here, each with their own specific ethnic, religious and economic statuses. There were three recognized ethnic groups that would benefit from citizenship rights, or *natio*s: the Hungarians, the Szeklers and the Germans. Within these ethnic groups, there were four accepted religions: Catholicism, Calvinism, Lutheranism and later Unitarianism. I will briefly describe these groups and the relations between them.

The largest group numerically was the Romanian group, mostly peasant serfs, though a few of them were small landowners, more commonly in the mountain areas.

Before the nineteenth century the vast majority of Romanians were Orthodox, but during a period of counter-reformation initiated by the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Joseph II a Uniate Church was founded, namely the Greek-Catholic Church, that recognized the Catholic Pope as its institutional and spiritual leader while keeping the traditions and rites of the Orthodox Church. The Romanians were not recognized as a *natio* and only after the conversion to the Uniate religion did they start benefiting from some of the rights that other ethnic groups enjoyed. Of the three recognized *natio*s in Transylvania, the Hungarians formed much of the aristocracy, the big landowners' class, and the intellectual elite. Most of the Hungarian peasants were free and some were involved in commerce and crafts, although more commonly these occupations were the domain of Germans and Jews. The Germans living in Transylvania moved to the region starting in the thirteenth century, but Austro-Hungarian ruler Maria Theresa provided considerable incentives for Germans, usually from Saxony and Swabia, to relocate to the border regions of the empire and defend it in exchange for land and a protected status. The Szeklers, an ethnic group related to Hungarians<sup>8</sup> were, like the Germans, installed at the borders of the Hungarian Kingdom and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire to protect it. They were mostly free peasants, located in the south-eastern part of Transylvania. Although these ethnic groups did not homogeneously occupy one particular social position (there were Hungarian and German serfs for example, but their number was

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<sup>8</sup> The Szeklers are supposedly related to the Magyar groups that migrated to Central Europe (this is still debated); though even today they retain a distinct ethnic identity. In any case, they were Magyarized quite early in the Middle Ages, around the eleventh century, and they speak Hungarian.

insignificant), more often than not they dominated certain social positions, domains of activity, and even regions.

By the middle of the nineteenth century Transylvania, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as an autonomous region, became an integral part of Hungary, and as such it faced different conditions than the Romanian Kingdom. A majority of its landowners were non-Romanians, usually Hungarians, Jews, or Germans. Animal husbandry and mixed farming were much more common here, as opposed to Wallachia and Moldova, regions in which the focus was cereal production. Land-working techniques were also more advanced in this region, compensating for the inferiority of land, compared with the southern and eastern parts of the country. Moreover, commercial and industrial production comprised a greater share of the economy, and the region was more urbanized than its Romanian counterparts. However, most of the urban settlers were non-Romanians, meaning that the professional, bureaucratic, and working class strata of the population tended to be largely non-Romanian. Thus, even if in Transylvania servitudes were abolished before the Old Kingdom and medium properties were relatively more numerous, the disparity between big and small estates was still prevalent, and it had an extra dimension, namely an ethnic division, by which around 98% of all property measuring more than 100 yokes belonged to Hungarians and other ethnic minorities (Verdery 1993, Livezeanu 2000).

In 1918, Romanians were in a majority but most of them lived in rural areas. The figure below shows the ethnic structure of Transylvania in 1910 and the proportion of each ethnic group in the urban areas. We can see that Romanians, although representing



more than half of the population, were present in smaller numbers in the urban areas. All the other major ethnic groups represented bigger shares of the city population than their actual proportion from the total population.

**Fig. 2 Major Ethnic Groups in Transylvania in 1910<sup>9</sup>**

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>% of Total Population</b>	<b>% of Urban Areas</b>
<b>Romanians</b>	53.8	19.7
<b>Hungarians</b>	31.6	62
<b>Germans</b>	10.7	15.8
<b>Jews</b>	3.5	10.7

These social conditions often translated ethnicity into privilege and class. This relation between ethnicity and class did not imply that all the Hungarians were part of the elite, all the Germans were middle class, and all of the Romanians were forming a homogeneous underclass; nevertheless, certain ethnic groups did tend to be overrepresented in certain classes or occupations.

By 1918, Romanians had considerably more freedoms than they had in the nineteenth century. They were liberated from serfdom; they gained citizenship rights; and they had a national intellectual elite comprised mostly of teachers, Greek-Orthodox priests, and journalists. In 1918, when Transylvania was united with Romania, many of

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<sup>9</sup>(Source: Livezeanu, 2000)

these ethnic relations were reshuffled. The union with Wallachia and Moldova, where Romanians were the dominant ethnic group both in terms of numbers and economic and political power, transformed the Hungarians into a minority and created conditions for upward mobility in the Romanian community. The land reform contributed a lot to improving the economic condition of the peasantry in general and the Romanian peasantry in particular, but the promotion of ethnic Romanians in the administration, education and other sectors, where previously they were underrepresented, alleviated some of the inequalities between different ethnic groups.

Although the union had an immediate effect on the economic and social status of the Transylvanian ethnic groups, centuries of ethnic-based privilege or lack thereof promoted certain groups into particular class position. These class positions tended to reproduce after the union, as in the case of Caraseu, where the big landlord of the village did not lose his economic position after the reform, though he lost half of his land in the process. I will show in the sections below how a transfer of land and wealth from the big landowning classes to the peasantry was orchestrated after World War I in all of Greater Romania and how this reform developed in Caraseu.

#### 4. 1917-1921 LAND REFORM: GENERAL REGULATIONS

The land reforms of 1917-1921 were promised to the Romanian soldiers fighting in the Great War by none other than King Ferdinand I. The army, mostly composed of peasant soldiers, needed an incentive in order to continue fighting, and the promise of land had remained central within political and social debates for at least a decade prior to

the end of the war. In 1917, it was too soon to foresee the full extent of these land reforms because of the impending union of Transylvania, Bucovina and Bessarabia with the Romanian Kingdom. However, as stated above, discussions on land and agriculture were not a novelty at that point in time, and the agricultural reform that directly followed the war was not unexpected. Even before the war started, Romania had two major parties alternating in power. This tradition continued well into the inter-war<sup>10</sup> period, and it was interrupted only by the autocratic rule of Carol II. The Conservative Party represented landowners' interests, pushing for measures that would force owners back to their farms and for peasants' freedom to sell and mortgage their estates, thus creating a class of rich peasants and landless laborers. The Liberal Party, with its mercantile tendencies, opposed expropriation in the early decades of the century, but by the outbreak of the war changed its position and supported the expropriation of land from big landowners. The Liberal Party was mostly associated with commercial and banking interests; later they were the most outspoken supporters of industry (Roberts, 1951). The machinations of these two parties were rarely related to ideological or principled reasons. Thus, after years of debate and a war, the Land Reform Act was passed in 1921. The purpose of the reform was to make the small landowners more autonomous, to create medium-sized farms, and to further the interests of industry and industrial workers (Article 1, Decree no 117 of 12 Sep 1919, in Mitranyi, 1930). The land reforms, according to Mitranyi (1930), aimed to create a peasant middle class ready to absorb industrial goods produced by an emerging

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<sup>10</sup> Although the Conservative Party did not survive the introduction of the universal male vote and was replaced in the inter-war period by the National Peasant Party, the latter oppositional force to the Liberals was much less often in power than the strong Liberal Party; nonetheless, it offered a stable political counter offer for the electorate.

industry, while at the same time creating a labor force ready to be integrated into the industrial working classes. The land reform of 1917-1921 aimed to do the following:

- To expropriate a total of two million hectares of land, where all estates over 100 hectares would have to give up a proportional amount of land.
- To expropriate all crown and mortmain land, together with land from absentee and foreigner landowners.
- Compensation was based on the price of sale in the region in the five years prior to 1916, evaluations based on credit institutions, net income per hectare and other factors; the price was not to exceed twenty times the regional rental terms.
- Peasant associations were created as temporary recipients of the land <sup>11</sup>

Criticism of the land reform challenged not only the fashion in which it was done, but also the arbitrary goals set by the government. Firstly, the amount of land to be expropriated was established without taking into account the quality of the land, the need for land in specific regions as opposed to others, or the general organization of the estates. Except in Transylvania, the expropriation was based on the size of the property rather than the proprietorship, thus creating an advantage for owners with several estates. At the end of the reform 5.8 million hectares were redistributed, of which 3.7 million ha of arable land was divided among about 1.4 million people. Peasants owning 10 ha or less owned 60 percent of the Romanian land and the average size of a holding were 3.8 ha, less than the amount of land needed to provide adequate financial support to a family (Roberts, 1951).

## 5. THE LAND REFORM IN TRANSYLVANIA

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<sup>11</sup>In Mitrany, 1930

The Land Reform Act voted by the Romanian Parliament in 1921 extended to the newly incorporated territories, namely Bessarabia, Transylvania, and Bukovina. All under foreign rule prior to 1919, these territories had large land areas in the hands of non-Romanians and foreign citizens. Although on the 1 December 1918 King Ferdinand was crowned king of all united Romanian territories, the official treaty that sealed the new territorial arrangement between Hungary, now one of the successor states of the Austro-Hungary empire, and the Allies was signed only in 1920. The land reform that foresaw the radical re-organization of agriculture on all the united territories was finally passed by the Romanian Parliament in 1921, with regional regulations for all the new incorporated territories. In Transylvania the land reform had to take into account regional characteristics, some basic ones such as the measuring system<sup>12</sup>, and many more complex factors like the citizenship status of the big landowners, the institutional actors from what had then become “abroad” (mostly Hungarians), and a sometimes hostile administration. Initially, it was ordered that land reform would include:

- the full expropriation of foreigners’ estates
- certain public/private institutions were partially expropriated, mostly churches;
- institutions whose residence was outside Romania were fully expropriated;
- estates leased for more than 12 consecutive years were all expropriated;
- expropriation of all landlords who bought land after July 31’ 1914 and were not themselves cultivators;

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<sup>12</sup> Land was measured in yokes, not in hectares. One cadastral yoke was approximately the equivalent of 0.575 ha. I will keep this measuring system in this paper, because all of the documents and the secondary literature on the period discuss the amount of land in these terms.

- all estates over 500 yokes, but not below 200 yokes.

Provisions in Transylvania were more flexible and compensations were less rigid and more prompt than in the other regions. Also, here, as opposed to the Principalities, expropriation was applied to landowners rather than estates. This meant that the whole amount of land one person or institution owned was taken into account when measuring the quota of land expropriated. In the Principalities, landowners with several estates benefited from the regulations because estates smaller than 100 ha were not taken into account for the expropriation. It is safe to assume that big landowners from the Principalities held a larger influence over the legislators in Bucharest, while the largely Hungarian landowners from Transylvania did not have these same advantages.

Nonetheless, because of the previous social organization of the region, in which Hungarians owned most of the land and Romanians most commonly were part of the lower layers of the peasantry, there was a considerable transfer of land from Hungarians to Romanians. This of course infuriated the non-Romanian residents of the region and even triggered a few lawsuits against the Romanian state in international courts for discrimination. Although some authors argue that the nationalistic tendencies were a byproduct of the reform and not a cause of it (Mitrany 1930, Roberts, 1951) I would argue that, byproduct or not, the weakening of a strong Hungarian landowning class and the transfer of land to peasants (be they Romanians or not), who were traditionally the main opposition class to the landowners, would benefit the young Romanian state. It would not only strengthen its legitimacy and that of the king in the eyes of the largest social class in the country, the peasantry, but it would also reduce some of the economic

and political power of a strong elite that was, as we have seen above, more often than not at odds with their rulers.

## 6. THE LAND REFORM IN CARASEU

The village of Caraseu, situated near Satu Mare, or Szatmar as it was known at the time, was part of a sub-region of Transylvania, which was part of Hungary prior to the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was an ethnically mixed village, where Romanians, Hungarians, Jews and Gypsies lived together. All of the Romanians were of Uniate (Greek-Catholic faith), while the Hungarians were Calvinists. There were two churches in the village and a small synagogue, built in the backyard of the big landlord's home. The villages of the post-Trianon Satu Mare County were documented by the only local Romanian newspaper, *Ziarul Satu Mare*, which started publishing in 1921 and stopped in 1936. Its articles, though generally reflecting the political platform of the National (later the National Peasant) Party, dedicated a reasonable amount of space to agrarian issues and the villages in the county during this period. Read critically *Ziarul Satu Mare* is a valuable source of information and it provided me with quite an amount of anecdotal evidence, but also with much needed results of the land reform, general opinions about its implementation, census results, and propaganda pieces. A few major and recurring themes approached by the paper deserve some attention, because I believe they give an idea of village life in the county during the inter war period. The promotion of reading, writing and education was a major concern for the Romanian elites of the region because of the quasi-monopoly that ethnic minorities had on cultural life (Livezeanu, 2000). The nationalist impulses of the paper are evident; however, the paper

reflects an interest for the “state of the peasantry”<sup>13</sup> and this resulted in a large volume of articles dedicated to the issue. Some of the projects covered were the promotion of Romanian reading and culture clubs, Romanian books in village libraries, and educational programs for the peasants all with the aim of encouraging the usage of Romanian language and literacy. A major cause of concern for Romanian intellectual elites was not only that whom they deemed to be Romanian peasants could not speak Romanian at all, but that they could neither read, nor write. The illiteracy level was around 65-70 percent in Satu Mare County in the 1920s.<sup>14</sup> In a village of around 300-400 families, one third of the villagers were Romanians and the rest were Hungarians. There were also around 30 Jewish families, mostly involved in small trade, crafts, and they owned most of the service points in the village, such as the pharmacy, the grocery store and the local mill. According to several of my interviewees, the Jewish community almost never intermarried with the Romanians and the Hungarians, but there were on rare occasions marriages between the Romanians and Hungarians.

The biggest landlord in the village was Mayer Sandor, a Jewish agriculturalist from Satu Mare. He owned more than 1000 yokes of land in this village alone. According to the recollections of some of the villagers, he was a very present landlord, who personally picked his employed workers and sent his children to study agriculture abroad in order to have qualified people to manage his estate. Many of the stories about Mayer Sandor seem to be told with an air of regret and warmth. It is important not to forget that

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<sup>13</sup> *Ziarul Satu Mare*, no 55, 12 July 1925

<sup>14</sup> *idem*



many of my interviewees were merely children, when he was taken away by Hungarian troops one day in 1944 and sent to Auschwitz, together with the majority of Jews in the village. The little archival and journalistic material I found about him and his relations to the co-villagers shows that in 1923, when a large proportion of his land was expropriated, he was accused by a committee, representing 60 villagers from Caraseu entitled to obtain housing lots, of refusing to distribute land next to the main road for new households which had been promised to the poorest peasants. The villagers upset that they were receiving land outside the village while some Romanians were still living in the “gypsy area”, shows that the villagers who wrote the complaint were concerned that their status in the village was being equated with the status of the Gypsy community. Complaints appeared in the local newspaper in the form of an open letter. The letter reveals some of the interactions from the village. Not surprisingly, the gypsy community was isolated at the outskirts of the village, where some Romanians were also living. Today, it is difficult to assess the spatial organization of the village according to ethnicity. My first assumption would be that ethnic Hungarians usually lived next to the main road, because today most of the older Hungarians still live there, while the older Romanians have houses in the interior of the village, usually in the areas newly constructed after collectivization. Much of the village was rebuilt after the collective farm was established and people tore down their old houses, covered with reeds, and built newer, bigger ones. New plots of land were distributed; people sold their houses and moved to the city. It is hard to say with certainty how the village looked nearly a century ago. In any case, by 1920 the villagers of Caraseu were officially part of Greater Romania. They had a new king and a new citizenship. They were Promised Land regardless of ethnicity, they were

promised new schools, and they were promised a better life. The Hungarians were guaranteed equal rights as long as they swore loyalty to the new state. Many of them left. The population of the city decreased in the first decade after the union, and the percentage of the Romanians increased, which can only mean that many Hungarians and Germans left, and that the colonization tactics of the state paid off. But many more remained and witnessed a considerable transfer of land to Romanians, who happened to be the poorest ethnic group, besides the Romas (Verdery, 1983). The Romanian state started to gather information and the new authorities demanded data about the new lands and the peoples they were ruling. From the number of the trees on the expropriated lands and their average circumference, the situation the grazing fields, the amount and type of harvests, to the number of cattle and the number of the inhabitants, the state collected data that would facilitate the implementation of the new policies in the Transylvanian territories. That is how we know that the number of inhabitants in 1925 in Caraseu was 1,402, that the number of big cattle was 787, while the number of small cattle was 117. The administration of the new territories needed to be integrated into the new state and the first step was to ensure the legibility of the areas. Standardization and legibility are essential parts of state creation (Scott, 1999) as it ensures the state's tighter grip on the newly acquired people. Moreover, in order to extract the resources available in a particular land, the state also needs to map out these resources. The same holds true for distribution and, if the authorities were to give land, they needed to know to whom they were giving it. With all the promises the Romanian state made, by 1923 the peasants of Szatmar, and specifically the ones in Caraseu, did not yet receive their promised land.

The expropriation of land had already started and the situation of the expropriated land looked as follows:

**Fig 3 Landowners and the expropriation of land in Caraseu 1923<sup>15</sup>**

Landowner's Name	Land Owned	Land Expropriated
Mayer Sandor	1029 yokes	561 yokes
Boszony Emil	126 yokes	34 yokes
The Hungarian Calvinist Church	10 yokes	5 yokes
Pop Dezideriu <sup>®</sup>	-	169 yokes
The Altruistic Bank <sup>16</sup>	646 yokes	646 yokes
Total	1811 yokes	1415 yokes

There was no data for this landowner concerning the initial amount of land he owned before expropriation. This makes me assume that he owned land in several villages and the commission responsible for the expropriation was just ordered to expropriate that amount of land from this village's territory.

<sup>15</sup> Source: Agrarian Commission, 1923, *Corespondenta privind reforma agrara in Caraseu* (Correspondence regarding the Agrarian Reform in Caraseu), 1/1923:1, County Direction of the National Archives of Romania-Satu Mare Direction (Satu Mare, Romania)

<sup>16</sup>It is unclear to me why a bank would own so much land in the village. I was unable to find more information about this entity from the local newspaper, the archives, or the villagers. One brief monograph of another village from Western Transylvania mentions the bank as the legal executor of one of the landlord's properties. In 1918 the bank was put in charge of parceling and selling the land of a Hungarian noble from Budapest from the Neupanat village, right after the territory became part of Greater Romania. Whether this was the case in Caraseu remains uncertain; however, the lack of information regarding this land and its owner might indicate that the land was not cultivated and, if it was, the landowner was an absentee one.

Mayer Sandor the biggest landowner in the village had half of his land expropriated. The second major owner was a bank from Budapest with an unusual name, the Altruistic Bank, which lost all of its land, because it was an institution with a residence outside the country. Documents show that Boszony Emil owned 126 yokes in Caraseu, but most of the land he owned was situated in the neighboring village. The Hungarian Calvinist Church also lost half of its land, because it was a religious institution. The Romanian Uniate Church is missing from the expropriated landowners' list, which signifies that it either possessed very little land or received preferential treatment.

From the initial expropriation, 176 villagers were given land (with an average parcel of 4.5 yokes or 2.5 ha per household or per villager?), along with the Greek Catholic Church (Romanian Church) and the parish, the Romanian school and teacher, the local gendarmerie, and a few yokes were allocated as livestock field and a sports field. Colonizing the border areas with ethnic Romanians was one of the priorities of the state. If after the distribution of land there was enough land left in the national reserve, then the law allowed for colonists to settle in these areas. The decision of exactly how much land to distribute in a village was settled by the state. In Caraseu 100 yokes were allocated to the delegate of the colonists. Prior to the land reform the village did not have any communal grazing land, and for this reason 200 yokes were allocated. However, the peasants were not willing to pay 300 lei/ yoke to use it, claiming that it was a low-quality grazing field and therefore the appropriate value should be 150 lei/yoke. This was only one of the complaints people had regarding the reform.

There were constant readjustments during the first years of the reform. The state made indiscriminate budget cuts, adding to the number of the beneficiaries, allocating more land to small-holding families and to the newly formed institutions of the state, while finalizing the last measurements of the expropriation. This back-and-forth process was not accepted with passivity by either the expropriated or the beneficiaries. While big Hungarian landlords were suing the state in both national and international courts for discrimination and abuse, the peasants were generally feeling mistreated by the Agrarian Commission and were filing petitions and demanding justice in the local newspaper. The complaints were various and they included dissatisfaction with the small amount of land received, the delays in distributing the land, the complicated bureaucratic mechanism of data collection, information, and the processing of requests. Moreover, the general dissatisfaction with the implementation of the land reform was not limited to formal complaints. On many occasions villagers would employ similar actions to those of the big landlords. Entering the expropriated fields with their plows and working the land without permission, distributing the land by themselves, or cutting wood from the expropriated forests were common acts of revolt and impatience<sup>17</sup>. In Caraseu the big landowner was caught chopping trees from his expropriated land, and villagers were arrested for grazing their cattle on Mayer's land during the night<sup>18</sup>.

Only in 1924 were the expropriations finally made official. The distribution of land had not yet started and the people were hungry for even the little land they were promised.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ziarul Satu Mare* No 55, 9<sup>th</sup> of July 1922

<sup>18</sup> *Ziarul Satu Mare* No 38, 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1922

Another bureaucratic glitch managed to infuriate the peasants even more. The Land Reform Law stipulated that before their distribution the expropriated lands would be transferred into the state's possession and interested parties would be allowed to lease the land, work it, and pay a fee to the state. By 1926 none of the lease agreements, signed with peasants in 1924, had been paid to the state.

In 1924 the land of the Altruist Bank was fully expropriated by the state. One hundred and forty three peasants bought the land, but the Agrarian Commission did not officially approve the transactions made between the local authorities and the villagers. The documents do not specify the reason for this refusal; however, they gave provisions regarding further action, which was to remake the tables with interested persons and distribute the land on the 11 March 1925. At this point the working of these lands was halted indefinitely. The local authorities together with the responsible agronomist then organized a general meeting with the villagers, at which the latter found out about the change in status of their lands. They reluctantly agreed to pay the leasing price for the land, but they specified in the minutes of the meeting how they felt insulted by the intention of taking away their property rights over the land<sup>19</sup>. The affair resurfaced in 1926, when an angry local agronomist in charge of the land reform for this particular village suggested in an official letter to the Agricultural Commission that all the villagers guilty of signing the lease would have to be pursued by the Finance Commission and fined, while all of the land they were working under the aforementioned contracts should

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<sup>19</sup> Agrarian Commission, 1925, *Corespondenta privind reforma agrara in Caraseu* (Correspondence regarding the Agrarian Reform in Caraseu), 227/1925:19-39, County Direction of the National Archives of Romania-Satu Mare Direction (Satu Mare, Romania)

be auctioned. Eventually, the Protestant priest leased 500 yokes of land and three people from a neighboring village leased the rest. These events represented the beginning of the volatile relationship between peasants and their new state.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The village of Caraseu was integrated in 1918 into the Romanian state. For centuries it was part of the Hungarian monarchy and later the Austro- Hungarian Empire. When the union with the Romanian Kingdom finally happened, it was a shock for populations of all ethnicity. The union brought a land reform that brought many of them what they thought would be a self-sustainable and more independent life. Half of the families in the village were given land, and Mayer Sandor saw his estate cut in half. The land came with administrative complications that would define the relation between the Romanian state and its new subjects. Romania was not only distributing land to the peasants, but it was doing it on its own terms. The level of control over the land they now possessed was assigned by the state. More significantly, the land came with debt that needed to be repaid in the following decade.

The peasants received new land, but no new tools, no affordable credit, and no improved techniques. The level of productivity fell during the inter war years and it would take until the late 1930s to go back to yield-levels of the pre-war period (Ban, 2010). The new landowners of Caraseu saw themselves resorting more and more to outside employment in order to supplement their income and to be able to pay their debt and feed their families. I will discuss in the following chapter how it was possible that in

just a few years after one of the major land redistributions in Europe, the state of the peasantry in Romania was similar if not worse than before the war. I will show how the state actively engaged in transferring capital from the countryside to industry, how the integration in the market became a highly volatile situation for the peasantry, and how they resorted to outside employment and wage labor as a source of steadier income.



# CHAPTER IV:

## LAND, LABOR AND STATE IN INTERWAR ROMANIA

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The international and national policies of the interwar period impacted the peasants and their livelihood in sometimes unexpected ways. The land reform, the increased penetration of North American and Russian grains on the international market, the economic crises, and the rise of right wing movements all influenced the ways in which peasants worked, how they made ends meet, and the way they related to the state. I will show in the following sections what the two main political parties proposed as solutions for expanding and modernizing the economy in the post-World War I eastern European context and how their policies impacted the economic production of the villages and the labor relations between different groups of producers and owners. Moreover, I will describe how the labor relations predominant in the interwar period were affected by the land reform of 1921. I will then discuss more specifically the situation in the village, where working one's private plot coexisted with sharecropping and daily labor for the local landlord. I will show how the proletarianization of the peasantry was intensified in this period, and I will discuss the transition to a private property regime where the landlord owned a considerable amount of land and provided for extra income for poor families.

The end of the First World War brought about challenging structural changes for the newly formed states of Eastern and Central Europe. The Romanian Kingdom was one of them, and the Trianon Treaty of 1919 granted the country enough territory that would make it more than double in size. Greater Romania grew from 137,000 to 295,049 square kilometers. The ethnic composition of the country changed too: from an overwhelming Romanian majority the country became much more diverse with about 70 percent Romanians and the rest of the population belonging to other ethnic groups. Transylvania had roughly 57.8% Romanians, 24.4 % Hungarians, and 9.8 % Germans (Georgescu, 1992). Additionally, the new state needed to integrate its new territories and infrastructure, standardize its administration, education, and economy (Turnock, 2006). Railways, schools, tax laws, just to name a few, were previously part of different state structures and needed to be standardized across regions. A series of institutional and economic reforms brought about a considerable degree of social change, while the Land Reform Act of 1921 changed the property structure in the country; universal male suffrage opened up the political struggles to a far wider audience and changed the power structure of the main political parties. While the Liberals survived the new electoral law, the Conservative Party lost ground and was replaced by the Peasant Party and the National Party from Transylvania. The two latter merged into the National Peasant Party. Although the National Peasant Party only stayed in power for brief periods (from 1928-1931 and 1932-1933), it was the main opposition party throughout the interwar period. Other small parties also existed on the political scene, such as the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, and later the Iron Guard, a fascist formation that gained a lot of

popular support in the 1930s and entered the Parliament in 1936, when it managed to get 16 percent of the votes.

As other authors have shown (Roberts, 1951; Verdery, 1983) the Romanian state in the 1920s was a battleground between two main political factions, who approached industrial and agricultural development in different ways. The Romanian economy was preponderantly agrarian and much of the agricultural production focused on grain cultivation. Even though between 1920 and 1940, Romania was the fifth largest agricultural producer in the world, with a cultivated area of over 60 percent of its territory (Georgescu, 1992) and the commercialization of agriculture increased significantly during these two decades, in terms of development in the countryside it lagged behind Europe in general and even compared to its Central European neighbors (Verdery, 1983). Grains, cattle and raw materials formed much of its exports, while industrial goods were heavily imported. Industrialization needed to expand in order to make the country less dependent on developed economies such as Germany and France. Moreover, by 1930, 78% of the labor force in Romania was working in agriculture and only 10% in industry (Chirot, 1978). A series of measures were proposed by the economic and political elites of the time. The Liberals pursued a mercantilist path with state backed industrialization and increased protectionist measures aimed at shielding the national industry from outside competition, while the Peasant Party was more open to foreign capital investments in industry and a more welfare oriented policy in the countryside.

Besides international development in the market such as the influx of cheap grains from the United States and Russia, the increased protectionist measures taken by

European partners, and the economic recession of the 1930s, Romania also faced internal obstacles such as high indebtedness in the countryside, uncompetitive technology and overpopulation, just to name a few. The political instability of the two decades worsened the economic and social situation. After the death of Ferdinand I in 1927, his heir renounced the throne, just to come back a few years later and finally to establish an absolutist monarchy in 1938. Governments were changing on average every two years (Roberts, 1951) and the political scene was becoming increasingly fragmented.

On the international scene Romania did not fare any better. Throughout the 1920s France was the main political and economic ally of the country, but with the French decline and the increasing power of Germany and the Soviet Union, Romania was placed in an uneasy position. The territories it gained after the war were contested by almost all of its neighbors, with notable threats coming from the USSR, Hungary and Bulgaria. Moreover, Romania had a very weak army that was not able to face any military challenges (Lungu, 1989). With France's economic and political decline, came a closer alliance with Germany, which became gradually Romania's main economic partner. German companies became ever more present in the Romanian economy and by the late 1930s Germany had a quasi-monopoly on the Romanian economy, with mixed German-Romania companies exploiting oil reserves, minerals and gases, and with Germany importing most of the agricultural product of the country (Watts, 1993). This economic alliance, though it was vital for economic development in the post-recession world, came with a heavy price for Greater Romania. In 1940 Romania, with Germany's sanction, gave in on the pressures coming from the USSR and Hungary and ceded Northern Transylvania to Hungary and Bessarabia to the Soviet Union.

But before the developments of the 1940s came and swept Northern Transylvania from under Romanian rule, poverty, indebtedness, and underdevelopment were the bigger plagues that threatened the livelihood of the peasantry. In a dramatic speech given in front of the Parliament in 1931, one of the House representatives summed up the situation of the peasantry in Romania as such:

*“The crises reached a climax. A land owner in the county of Falciu who has five hectares of land, a wife and two children able to work, a couple of cattle, a cow with a veal, works the land by himself and has no debt,? has the following agrarian inventory: two hectares of corn, one hectare of wheat, one of barley, one of fodder for the cattle. The medium yield for five years was of 3000 kg corn of 2, 3 lei/kg making 6600 lei for the corn; 1600 kg wheat of 3 lei/ kg makes 4800 lei; 1800 kg barley of 1, 2 lei/kg; the total is 13600 lei; if he would have sold all of it, and he would have left none as seed, or for feeding his family, without paying his taxes or for paying for the grazing land. So he would have had to feed his family with 1125 lei per month, to feed his family and pay his taxes etc. If the same family would not have had any land, and no cattle, no seeds and if they would have worked the land for strangers 250 days a year with 25 lei per day they would have gained 25000 lei. This is the situation of the peasantry in the whole country. Worse than the worst of servants.*

*The other day a French author who at a simple official visit declared that the Romanian peasant is undernourished, has a weak vitality. In 1925 official doctors found 135 000 people infected with syphilis; in 1926 there were 128 000, and in 1927 140 000; in 1928 146 000 and in 1929 150 000! We have one million people infected with tuberculosis and 200,000 of them have open lesions. Pellagra! Pellagra disappeared after the war and now because of the misery people are living in doctor Paunescu from Mehedinti reported to me that the cases in his county are 10 to 10 000!”<sup>20</sup>*

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<sup>20</sup>*Viata satului în timpul marii crize economice — discurs al dr. Nicolae Lupu în Camera Deputatilor (Village Life during the great economic crises- speech in the Lower*

The situation that triggered this speech was happening only ten years after the land reform that distributed more than two million hectares of land to the peasants. I will continue the discussion of the land reform and the use of land in Caraseu in the following paragraphs, I will show how the peasantry ended up not being able to support a high level of production in the country and I will discuss the consequences of this failure.

## 2. LANDS

At the beginning of the 1920s, in Transylvania, 4.5 of the total of 5 million people were living in rural areas. Of these, roughly half a million peasants owned less than 5 yokes of land (less than 2.5 ha)<sup>21</sup> and around 400,000 owned no land at all. Thus, we can estimate that at least one fifth of the rural population was living in poverty. By 1922 the Agrarian Commission, assigned to expropriate the land in the Satu Mare County and distribute it to the entitled people, had not yet started its activity<sup>22</sup>. The Agrarian Reform Act was passed by the new Romanian Parliament in 1921, and one year later the proprietorship of many lands was as before the war, but with a very uncertain future in sight. In Caraseu, the local landlord remained in the country after Transylvania's annexation to Romania, and three years after the end of the Great War he was still working all of his lands as he did before. That would soon change, because by 1923 the Agrarian Commission started its activity and an intense work of measuring, counting, and

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Chamber of the Parliament, dr. Nicolae Lupu), 5<sup>th</sup> of January 1931, „Monitorul Oficial“, nr. 19, 3<sup>rd</sup> Part, pp. 269–287, personal translation

<sup>21</sup> *Ziarul Satu Mare* no 7, 4<sup>th</sup> of June 1922

<sup>22</sup> *idem*

selecting began<sup>23</sup>. Mayer Sandor lost half of his estate after the expropriations, but the land he owned and then lost was diverse and included more fertile lands like the ones on the bank of the river Somes, further lands with poorer qualities, lands at the outskirts of the village, and land within the limits of the village that could be used as building plots. He also owned orchards, a forest and grazing land.

Resources of national importance, as they were named in the Land Reform Act, such as forests, were taken into national custody and became part of the national reserve of land, as all the expropriated lands, but without the aim of being distributed. The grazing land also had a particular status, as it was donated to the village (obste or community) to be used and managed by the local authorities, but with a price, paid annually by each household. The land distributed for cultivation to each family was given according to need; landless and very poor families had priority, together with war veterans and colonists. The ones granted land would have to pay for the property they received in small installments, over a period of several decades. The payment of the peasants' debts proved to be a problem bigger than foreseen at the beginning of the distribution.

Although the forests were by 1924 officially part of the state's patrimony, they were given to the community for use, only under the condition of cattle ownership. The woods were state property and requests of gathering data on their number, type, and circumference of their trunks were sent by the municipal Agrarian Commission to the agronomists supervising the reform in villages; thus, the state obtained a full inventory on

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<sup>23</sup> *Ziarul Satu Mare* no 38, 16<sup>th</sup> of May 1923

the number, type and size of trees located in the near vicinity of the village. Mayer Sandor, the former owner of the forest, got himself into legal trouble after he was discovered cutting down the trees from his former land, before the end of the expropriation process<sup>24</sup>. Prior to the war, people were able to buy wood from the landlord, or more commonly to be paid in wood for some of the work they were doing during harvest season. The grazing land was equally problematic. Before the land reform the village did not have a communal grazing land. The villagers who owned cattle would either have to provide for them or pay a fee to use the landlord's grazing land. The local authorities decided to establish a pasture of 100 cadastral yokes and to ask for an annual fee of 300 lei per cattle. The villagers refused to pay this amount and proposed instead a fee of 150 lei per year, giving as the reason the poor quality of the pasture. Overall, 113 families received land of which 64 were Greek Catholic Romanians, and 49 were Protestant Calvinist Hungarians.<sup>25</sup>

The status and usage of many of these territories was decided by the state and imposed upon the owners and the villagers. The owners had much more leverage and resources in striking a deal with the state, while villagers needed to use (on many occasions) subterfuge, noncompliance acts, and straightforward opposition. While landowners would usually resort to administrative and judicial mechanisms to delay or contest the work of expropriation, the peasants were more limited in their options. Many

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<sup>24</sup> Agrarian Commission, 1924, *Corespondenta privind reforma agrara in Caraseu* (Correspondence regarding the Agrarian Reform in Caraseu), 226/1924:1-46, County Direction of the National Archives of Romania-Satu Mare Direction (Satu Mare, Romania)

<sup>25</sup> Agrarian Commission, 1925, *Corespondenta privind reforma agrara in Caraseu* (Correspondence regarding the Agrarian Reform in Caraseu), 227/1925:19-39, County Direction of the National Archives of Romania-Satu Mare Direction (Satu Mare, Romania)



of them were unfamiliar with taking legal action or using administrative measures to obtain their rights. *Ziarul Satu Mare* reported in the mid to late 1920s a few cases in the county of communities taking matters into their own hands<sup>26</sup>. Measuring, distributing and starting to work the land before the Agrarian Commission even started its activity was reported in at least two villages<sup>27</sup>. Other acts such as disregarding the trespassing regulations in forests, taking wood without permission, and taking cattle to the grazing area during the night were reported in Caraseu as well<sup>28</sup>. On one occasion the community even appealed to the local newspaper to make their complaints public, when they wrote an open letter to the authorities in order to signal the unfair allocation of building plots to Romanians in the village, in an area they considered unfit.<sup>29</sup>

The land peasants received transformed the country from one dominated by big landlords, to a country of smallholders. But with the land a new burden came in the form of indebtedness. Roberts (1951) estimates that around 30 percent of every family's income went to pay its debt. Georgescu (1992) argues that besides a chronic lack of knowledge regarding modern farming techniques, lack of tools and appropriate credit, peasants also did not get much support from their political leaders. With the Liberals in charge for most of the 1920s, no real measures to address the production crises in the country were taken. The economic crises and the high export duties on wheat made agriculture a very expensive and financially unrewarding endeavor. Only in 1935 did the

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<sup>26</sup>*Ziarul Satu Mare* no 10, 4<sup>th</sup> of February 1923, no 70 September 1923

<sup>27</sup>*Ziarul Satu Mare* no 38, 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1922

<sup>28</sup>Idem

<sup>29</sup>Idem no 70 September 1923

state intervene to stabilize the price of grains by establishing a minimum price for wheat; in addition, with the German penetration into the Romanian economy the types of food/grains produced changed (Georgescu, 1992). Unable to support themselves and their families from their own plots, peasants in Caraseu resorted to other sources of employment such as day jobs on the landowner's estate, increasingly going to the city to gain some capital and to buy more land, and starting in the 1930s peasants started taking orders? from the state and producing commissioned crops such as tobacco, hemp and vegetables.

### 3. COOPERATIVES, CAPITAL AND LABOR

On 2 July 1922 the local Romanian weekly *Ziarul Satu Mare* published an article decrying the state of the Agrarian Bank because of the appointment of Liberal-friendly bankers and politicians to the bank's Executive Board. The weekly openly supported the policies of the National Peasants' Party and usually published straightforward attacks on their rivals on a regular basis. In this particular issue the editors concluded: "*Now that the fight between capitalism and the cooperative has gained proportion, capitalism -good friend with the politicians- wants to swallow the cooperative*"<sup>30</sup>.

The article touches on a few sensitive political problems of those years. The political scene was dominated by two parties: the Liberal Party, with a long tradition of

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<sup>30</sup> *Ziarul Satu Mare* No 53 2<sup>nd</sup> of July 1922

being in power even before the war, and the newly formed National Party, which later united with the Peasants Party and brought together Transylvanian and Southern elites, who managed to top the now weak Conservative Party. Their electoral base was the peasantry, as the title indicated, but the party also relied on large landlords' support to a certain extent.

The Liberal Party with consistent following among the banking and financial elites wanted to attract the landowning classes interested in investing in a still insubstantial industry. The Liberal Party, although historically opposed to a radical land reform, suffered a change of attitude during the war, when it was reported (Roberts, 1951) that one of their leaders witnessed the huge difference in life standards between the Bulgarian and Romanian peasantry, during a campaign across the border. The Bulgarian peasantry had a stronger, more prosperous middle class, which was better equipped to invest in industrial products. Thus, the Liberals supported the 1921 Land Reform Act in the hope of transferring the money that landlords would receive from expropriation to the industrial sector, while creating a sturdier peasant middle class ready to buy the industrial goods produced and a landless, poor peasantry willing to fill potential factories (Hitchins, 1994). Their vision included a strong Romanian bourgeois class in charge of industrialization, backed up by a strong and more autonomous state. Their motto, "By our own means," revealed their nationalist attitude that translated into protectionist economic measures, meant to give a head start to an incipient Romanian industry right after the war. They were in power up until 1928, and then were replaced by the National Peasants' Party for two years, between 1928 and 1930. They then alternated in power with other parties throughout the 1930s; however, they were weak and constantly undermined by a

power hungry king. This was the fate of all the political parties leading cabinets in that decade, mostly because of Carol II's power grabbing techniques, one of which was particularly destabilizing: he would dissolve cabinets and replace them with loyal politicians just to change his mind and dissolve them again. In three notable years he changed the cabinet eight times, before he dissolved them permanently in 1938.

The National Peasants' Party, though in power for far less time than the Liberals, was a strong opposition party with a more open program towards foreign capital. Their "open gates" principle favored outside investment in Romania and did not perceive it as a threat. Their main political project throughout the interwar years was the establishment of a cooperative system, through which the peasants would associate in order to produce more efficiently, to get better credit and to protect themselves against the market. Although generally in favor of international markets and capitalism, the National Peasants' Party was also one that pushed for social policies aimed at protecting their electoral base, such as the refinancing of agricultural debt for the small peasantry and the establishment of cheap credit lines for investment. The cooperative was also promoted as a safe haven where the value of work would not be monetized and exploited.

The notion of labor promoted by the National Peasants' Party was one of "productive labor," as one of the *Ziarul Satu Mare* articles proposed.<sup>31</sup> In an article of the same name the author proposed the concept of "productive labor" as opposed to "exploited labor" as at the core of the association. "Productive labor" was an instance of work done for the subsistence and well-being of a community of peasants, not for profit.

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<sup>31</sup>*Ziarul Satu Mare* no 20 11<sup>th</sup> of March 1923

By using better working techniques and tools, the association or collective could manage to reduce their working hours, while producing enough to support themselves and their families. Moreover, through collective labor a sense of solidarity and community would be built and a sense of worth for individual members. Ideally, the free time thus gained would be employed to educate and improve the members of the association. Although it did not neglect the greater profit making potential of these entities, the article put them in opposition to the way in which big estates were being run, where the main incentive was profit and the method through which the demonized landlord succeeded in producing was by exploiting the work of the peasants. The author referred to Marx and the alienation of waged labor on large estates. Only a few years later by the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930 such intervention disappeared with an increase in anti-Bolshevik sentiments and the perceived simultaneous “communist” and “Russian” threat.<sup>32</sup>

The cooperatives were not as successful as the Peasant Party might have expected. Although incentives such as better credit lines and cheaper machines were available for peasants in these associations rarely were such initiatives launched by peasants themselves. Throughout the 1920s and the 1930s the cooperative was heavily promoted by party members and publications. *Ziarul Satu Mare* made a purpose of promoting the cooperative as a haven of modernity and progress. Mechanization and large-scale cultivation were seen as the way out of backwardness and misery. Together with better land-working techniques, better tools and seeds, the peasant also needed to develop as an individual and community. Modernizing became a duty and a matter of national

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<sup>32</sup>See *Ziarul Satu Mare* articles from no 70 September 1923, no 11 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1924 , no 34 7<sup>th</sup> of August 1932, no 45 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1932

importance<sup>33</sup>. According to the political program of the Peasant Party, as stated in *Ziarul Satu Mare*, the peasant cooperative should have been an educating and modernizing experience that would allow the peasants to produce efficiently, to save time and reserve more energy for self-improvement. Moreover, a campaign for the establishment of professional schools started, because it was believed that educated young men in the countryside would change the landscape of these old dormant communities. In Caraseu, I found no evidence or mention of such cooperatives existing before the establishment of the socialist regime. As the land reform was unfolding and people were receiving their land, new problems arose that took priority. The location and the amount of land received, the usage of forests and grazing land, the new debt that weighed on most households and the decreasing prices of cereals were more pressing issues in villages. The distribution of land after the much awaited land reform put the new state to the test and introduced its relation with the new subjects it incorporated.

The land reform distributed a lot of land, but it did not improve the condition of underdevelopment of the villages, and it lowered the production levels because of the fragmentation of land. Moreover, the crises of 1929 brought yet another heavy blow to economic development. Protectionist laws were scrapped, foreign capital was welcomed, and lucrative businesses were given to foreign lenders (railways, telephone etc.), straining the budget even more. The crises hit Romania in 1929 and as the demand for oil and grains, Romania's main exports, fell together with industrial production and the closing

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<sup>33</sup> See "Every Farm a Factory", Fogelson (2003)

of 500 banks (Ban, 2010); the country entered a deep recession that pushed it towards an authoritarian regime. As the economic downturn spread, the number of strikes increased in the urban areas.

#### 4. LABOR

Starting in the interwar period the state strove to increase production in the agricultural sector, while looking to develop its still infant industry. After the Land Reform of 1921 the fragmentation of property was exacerbated, and although the potential emergence of a peasant middle class ready to absorb industrial goods was appealing, this also entailed more fragmentation of large estates that had a bigger potential of industrializing agricultural production. The agrarian problem, as it was called, was not only an economic, but a social and environmental problem. The solution promoted by the National Peasants' Party was association in the countryside and foreign capital investment in industry. The cooperative system as designed by this party would have had peasants working in associations, taking credit to improve their tools and seeds and producing more agricultural surplus to be sold on the market. The ways in which the land was cultivated by different groups varied after the Land Reform of 1921. Also, the property regimes existent at the time engaged peasants, landlord and the state authorities into several types of economic and social relations.

The land in the village was shared between the landlord, peasant households, the churches, and the state. The Mayer estate was a private domain run by its owner with the help of his sons, according to the accounts from villagers. In addition, Mayer Sandor

employed villagers to administer the domain. These employees were paid a fixed monthly salary, but they were also compensated in produce from the farm, grains, firewood, and they were offered housing by their employer. According to the daughter of one of these administrators, they lived in close proximity to the other families employed by the Mayer family in a central location in the village. She remembers those days as peaceful and protected ones, recounting how during a particularly bad harvest year around 1941-1942, there was a famine, and she was the only child in school eating white bread. She tells an anecdote of when the teacher expressed surprise in front of the whole school that she and her family could afford such a luxury. This made her feel uncomfortable, because the other children were eating baked potatoes and corn bread for lunch. Other accounts about these families always stress their privileged status and better economic conditions and they always mention how the landlord would handpick them personally.

*Mayer Sandor had a long house and he had 12 servants in it. With their families and all. There they lived, they got a house there and they even had stables. And there he had the servants, their wives and children. They could plow for him and they got the third part, and 10 meters of fire wood, and 15 quintals of corn. He offered them maintenance. He gave them money; I am not sure how much, only for maintenance.*<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Interview AI, Male, 91 years, Retired



The estate was cultivated and administered primarily by the Mayer family and their employees, but most of the year the landlord would be the main employer in the village. Villagers worked as daily laborers or they would lease land in a sharecropping system. The methods of payment seem to have varied as villagers mention being paid both in cash and in kind, depending on the available produce. From beans to firewood and grains, the villagers would work in order to supplement their limited income. Another form of payment was in tools. The little capital that peasants had in the village was not enough for investments in tools, so the landlord would often allow them to borrow tools and use them to work the land. Cash payment was also available, but it was not very substantial. However, a weekly payment system was in place where every Saturday the day laborers would go and collect their week's pay from a small counter inside the landlord's courtyard.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, many of the villagers of Caraseu were working both their own plots and working for an employer as day laborers to supplement their earnings. The whole family was mobilized for work in both cases. At the same time, the private plot took priority most of the time and many were striving to buy more land and be less dependent on external sources of income. Children were often sent to work for the landlord, especially in work intensive periods such as the harvest period and on many occasions these earnings would make a considerable part of families' income. The life stories of two of my informants are very relevant for this point, as they were both born into families where the male earner was either deceased or disabled. Both of them came from rather poor

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<sup>35</sup> Interview Male, 86 years, Retired

families by their own assessment. While one was born in a family of seven daughters and a deceased father, the other had four siblings and a disabled father who could not work and needed almost constant care from a family member. Both families owned around three and a half hectares of land, received after the post-WWI land reform. Working the private plot of the family took priority, but both informants stated that most of their earnings came from working on the Mayer estate. For the poorer villagers of Caraseu the Mayer farm was the only secure source of income, although the status of daily laborers rendered them powerless and dependent on the employer. The leitmotiv of my interviews reveals this sense of security and there was hardly any interviewee who did not at least say “But there was work so we were not starving” or “It was hard but nobody who wanted to work was starving”. The emphasis most of the times was on the willingness of people to work and submit to the conditions available to them, make the best of them and assure the subsistence of their families. “Only those who did not want to work starved” is another common statement that describes the availability of work, but also the need to compromise in order to survive, and it is a theme that reoccurs not only for the inter-war period, but also for the socialist regime. The benchmark there was starvation and that in most periods was avoidable because of the existence of the landlord and the private plot, which most of the times would provide a bare minimum for survival. However, starvation was still a perceived threat and the economic conditions of the peasantry always kept them in close vicinity to this threat.

The state started leasing land to the villagers in the early 1930s. In Caraseu people were mostly contracted to cultivate tobacco. One of the villagers I interviewed remembers how one day state officials came to his father’s house and proposed to him to

plant tobacco. Skeptical at first, the family decided to take the offer because of the promise of much needed cash. Only families with enough space for drying were selected. Many of them were families with annexes around the house like deposit spaces for tools, machines and cattle, meaning that the poorer families were excluded from this potential deal with the state. The fortunate families received all the tools necessary for the plantation including rope needed to tie the little sprouts while they were growing. They got specific instructions on how to plant, manage and harvest the tobacco and occasionally would receive a visit from an agronomist, who would not only supervise the development of the plants, but would also make estimates on how much one particular plantation would have to yield. The selling of this tobacco to other parties was illegal; however, according to my interviewees? this was not observed at all times. Every winter after the tobacco leaves were dry, all the contractors would go to the tobacco factory in the city, get their harvest measured, and they would get paid according to the quality of their leaves.

The Land Reform Act of 1921 provided some relief to the peasantry but not enough to offer them a secure living based solely on their own plot. Day labor for richer peasants or on the Mayer estate was vital for many of them to live a decent living. Some traveled to the city to work in factories, or as house servants. Some were working to put money aside and buy more land, and others left the countryside permanently and sold the land to those who could afford it. However, most of my informants declared that their parents stayed in the village and tried to make a living from the land. To this mixture the newly established Romanian state brought other prospects, such as jobs in the administration, and leasing contracts for various cultures, most commonly tobacco. Much of the

administration had employed Hungarians before 1918, and this situation did not change radically after the war. After all, the already existing employees were the ones with the skills and knowledge necessary to run the bureaucracy. During one of my interviews with the son of a former tax collector and accountant in the local administration, I asked my informant to explain how his father managed to navigate through so many regimes. His father used to work for the Hungarian state prior to the war, continued working for the Romanian state and again for the Hungarians during the war. He finally retired a few years into the Socialist regime and his son, a former mathematics teacher and school head master in the village, was at his side starting with the interwar period. He remembers helping his father out with the accounting work first just doing his homework next to him at his desk, then computing taxes at his side and finally landing a job in the administration, only to give it up and become a teacher instead. I expressed my surprise at how a person could manage to keep up with so many changes, but he explained as follows:

*Computing taxes is the same in any state and any language. One day Hungarians told us to use this and that percentage, Romanians wanted another way, but my father did his job. He was given instructions and his job was the same, no matter who came and what rules they changed. You just need to change the percentages.*

Changing the administration entirely was not feasible and desirable for that matter. Some attempts were made to replace the teachers in some schools with Romanian teachers, but even that proved to be more of a challenge than first expected. The number of qualified Romanians for state jobs was not high and the state started a campaign of

educating potential teachers by encouraging any Romanian with a middle education to take intensive courses and be assigned to posts all over the region. This proved to be a disaster in many cases where under-qualified people were sent to schools but would not be able to handle the work (Livezeanu, 2000). Local secretaries were for the most part underpaid and overworked. They were reportedly overwhelmed with work and prone to accept bribes due to the low income provided by the state. In some villages even these jobs were unavailable as the state administration was completely absent (ref Satu Mare weekly).

Working the land in the 1920s and 1930s was not the most profitable activity one might engage in. Labor was the only resource the peasants had at their disposal. The amount of land people owned was limited and the problem of overpopulation started to take its toll on these communities. The obvious solution was to work for the landlord who would be a stable source of employment and income, even in harsh times. People were striving to accumulate more land but some of them chose to move to the city and work in factories. The level of control these villagers had over their own labor should have increased with the distribution of land. More land meant more security and ownership came with a bit more power to decide what to cultivate, where to work and when. However, the new land came with debt. Although they were owners now, the peasants were tied to the state and the landlord in a completely different way. The debt was to be repaid and the land that was supposed to assure more freedom locked the peasants in a relation of dependency with the state, who was the guarantor for their loans. Soon, the debt problem in the countryside grew to the point where it was unsustainable. The peasants were not producing enough for their families to live and pay their debts.

The villagers of Caraseu were allotted land but also a considerable amount of debt that they could not repay from their plot. They were actively involved in other forms of employment to increase their revenues, and from daily labor, to paid jobs in the city or more rarely in the local administration they were engaging with different types of employment. The level of control they had over their labor varied. While on their own plot they would decide how to work and how to use the products of their land, on the landlord's fields they were employed for specific units of time, or for specific tasks and portions of land. The conditions here were more flexible and according to the type of skill and the type of assignment the landlord was commissioning, the landlord would pay for time units, task units or just for the final product. For harvesting the wheat, he would pay per day, for plowing he would pay per area plowed and in a sharecropping system he would get anything between half or one third of the harvest according to the agreement. Villagers working in the city would earn (again according to their job) monthly fixed payments or were paid per day. Although some authors argue that working their own land and being in control of their own labor was highly valued in peasant societies (Lampland, 1995) in Caraseu having a steady employment working for the Mayer estate was appreciated and esteemed for its reliability and prestige. This is not to say that the independence and status position coming from owning land and being their own masters was losing ground completely. What I am arguing is that during the interwar period peasants learned that owning land would not make them less vulnerable in the face of hardship and famine. Being tied to an ever stronger state and becoming increasingly integrated and affected by the international market changed the options they had at their disposal and the values attached to certain types of work.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The interwar Romanian state was a classical model of neo-mercantilism . The state devised measures meant to protect and help advance the national industry such as cheap credit, high import taxes on industrial goods, and advantageous tax cuts that promoted the accumulation of capital in big companies (Ban, 2010).<sup>36</sup> These funds were diverted from agriculture, and the preferential treatment industrial development received in comparison to agricultural production had consequences in the development of the countryside. Peasants were not able to access long term credit in order to finance the development of their tools and seeds. Production in the countryside was lower compared to other European countries, and the production costs higher, as peasants were compensating for the lack of technology with work intensive strategies. Moreover, the price scissoring between agricultural and industrial products together with the high taxes imposed on imported industrial goods made the acquisition of machines for many peasants unattainable. The tax reductions for capital supported the new emerging capitalist class, who found in the interwar Romanian state a close protector (Ban, 2010, Chirot, 1975). Industrial production increased by 80% between 1925 and 1938 (Turnock, 1970), but the countryside stayed stagnant and underdeveloped.

Subsistence agriculture became more and more volatile as a source of income and as a way of living. As prices for grains fluctuated, so did the peasants' earnings and their capital. Employment in the city or for the landlord became a safe alternative to the private

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<sup>36</sup>Ban, Neoliberalism, PhD thesis 2010

plot. As people changed the way they related to waged labor, they changed their attitudes towards their own autonomy and basis of their independence. “As long as we have land we will have something to eat” was replaced by “As long as there is work and we are able, we will have something to eat”. Labor became the peasantry's main asset to be bought and sold on a new type of market. When the socialists came to power in the late 1940s, they transformed the peasantry into an agrarian proletariat when they collectivized the land and took away the last sources of autonomy for the peasantry, and the biggest threat to the state's control over the national economy. If the roles and the men they created in the process were new, they had at least rehearsed for a few decades. I will show in the fourth chapter how the collectivization of land took place in Caraseu and how it was received by the local peasantry.



# CHAPTER V:

## COLLECTIVIZATION IN CARASEU

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1944 Romania was a state shattered by war, territorial division and institutional chaos. Romania entered the war on the German side, though it lost Northern Transylvania and Bessarabia with its ally's consent in 1944. The Soviet Army entered the country in 1944 and on 23 August it took down the military regime of General Antonescu. A few years of political instability followed, when a very young King Michael I could not challenge the power of an increasingly strong Workers' Party and finally succumbed to their demands and left the country in 1948. Structural conditions, such as the war and the breakdown of state structures that came with it, must be taken into account when analyzing the establishment of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and in Romania. The proximity to the Soviet Union and the international consensus that left Eastern Europe under Soviet domination after the war contributed to the establishment of new regimes in the region. The presence of the Soviet Army on Romanian territory offered considerable support for a small communist party to slowly take power and finally in 1948 declare the country a socialist republic. Moreover, the brutality of the war in Northern Transylvania was exacerbated by the Hungarian takeover in 1940 and the deportation of the Jews from the Hungarian territories. The consequences of the war and the shock that followed

allowed for the newly established regime to take a faster grip on the state and to impose itself. A process of rebuilding and restructuring started first with the administration, and soon after with a new land reform and the nationalization of the industry. I will discuss in this chapter the establishment of the socialist regime in Romania in the aftermath of the Second World War, the impact that the land reform had on the reception of the socialist regime in the countryside and the establishment of the collective farm in Caraseu. I will show how there are parallels with the post-WWI period, and I will argue that the socialist state confronted some similar problems in the countryside to those of the Romanian state in the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, I will show how the villagers in Caraseu experienced the establishment of the collective farm and how they interpreted their experience in terms of changes in labor practices and labor relations.

The first major national project of the socialists in Romania was to undertake a land reform, by which the state distributed land from confiscated estates. Only a few years later the same land would be taken away and integrated into collective farms. The industry was nationalized as well and the economy slowly shifted towards a command economy in which five-year plans prescribed actions and results in accordance with the state's ideals. In Northern Transylvania and in Caraseu the coming to power of the socialists impacted the population in different ways than in the rest of the country. Northern Transylvania was part of Hungary during the war but was reverted to Romania in 1944. A fearful minority population was more open to a political organization with class-based policies than to the traditional Romanian parties with a long history of inter-war nationalism (Bottoni, 2010). The distribution of land, which in the Satu Mare county was considerable, appeased the peasantry from the Romanian and Hungarian ethnic

groups. Moreover, the violence of the war and the economic situation in this region created conditions that allowed for a particular narrative of collectivization to be proposed. Collectivization was the major event that marked the establishment of the regime in Northern Transylvania and in Romania, and I will show how a perspective that takes into account immediate factors such as the violence of the war and the changing state structures, but also looks at long-term historical conditions such as the changing labor conditions in the interwar period and the economic policies of the Romanian state in the 1920s and 1930s offers a new narrative of collectivization and its reception.

The major argument proposed throughout this thesis is that labor matters and changes in labor practices and in the conditions of production change people's views, their understanding of their lives and of their surroundings. I also argue that not only the objective condition of working the land changed but peasants' understandings of what were appropriate conditions to earn not only an income but a living. Working for money, working for an employer, working without being able to control what and how you work were not uncommon and not even frowned upon practices. Although, working one's own land was treasured beyond any other form of production, the stability of outside employment won over peasants. I used labor practices as a lens through which state-society relations and social change can be viewed. It is a perspective that tries to bring structural change to a smaller scale and to understand how states are experienced in practice. Although changes like the ones enumerated above shook societies to their cores, at least one thing remained constant: that people had to work in order to live. I will continue exploring this perspective in the last chapter and I will show what were the continuities between the three decades that preceded the establishment of the collective

farm in Caraseu in terms of labor practices and labor relations, what were the main political and economic events that shaped the times they were living in and how the villagers interpreted and experienced these changes. I will start with a discussion of socialism in Romania and its first formative years.

## 2. SOCIALISM IN ROMANIA

Levy (2001) notes that in 1945 the Romanian Workers' Party only had a few hundred members throughout the country. Ana Pauker, a major figure of the Party since its early underground years, started a recruiting campaign right after 1945 in order to increase the number of the members to half a million people and proposed a more relaxed entrance policy. Confronted with a number of workers who previously were part of the Iron Guard she single-handedly decided to allow these workers to enter the party without consulting the other party leaders. With these measures a series of purges started in the administration and between 50,000 and 70,000 people were fired. The purges in the administration did not significantly influence the villagers of Caraseu, because very few of them had positions in the local administration. The recruitment campaigns managed to persuade a few villagers to join the ranks of the party. If in September 1946 there were three party members in the village (and 11 in Frontul Plugarilor), in just a few months five more were recruited and in 1947 there were 15 members in the village. Most of them were either workers or small artisans and craftsmen, and initially the Hungarians and two Jewish members dominated the group. This was similar to the situation in the county, where in 1946 of the 50 new members acquired, 41 were Hungarians, one was Jewish

and eight Romanian. After 1947, however, the situation in the village's changed and the Romanian peasants started to become the dominant group in the local party cell.<sup>37</sup>

The combination of war, economic collapse and revolution turned Bolshevik Russia into a building site for a new state. Soviet high modernism, similar to the tsarist one, aimed at creating a new man, through a process of civilization and ordering (Scott, 1999). Kligman and Verdery (2011) note how socialist regimes in Eastern Europe were following a Soviet blueprint to establish their administrations, and the proverbial "satellite states" were not named so in vain. However, in Romania as in other Eastern European countries, local conditions shaped the practices of the regime but also their reception.

Socialism, as an economic and political system, was established in societies where a large proportion of the economy was agrarian, where the industry, though it was expanding, was comparatively smaller than in Western countries, where there was a large inequality of income and in some cases not even a functional parliamentary democracy (Kornai, 1992). In Eastern Europe in particular socialism was largely imposed with the help of the Soviet Army and with the acquiescence of the Allies. In Romania a process of nationalization started early and in the first years of transition the Workers' Party worked at discrediting the former political leaders of the National Peasant Party and the Liberal Party, replacing parts of the administrative body, and remodeling the institutional structure of the country (Kuneralp, 1992). After the nationalization of te

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<sup>37</sup>PCR County Committee, 1947, *Planuri de munca, rapoarte de activitate, procese verbale privind activitatea sectiei Educatie Politica* (Work plans, progress reports, reports on department activity Political Education), 8/1947:78-79, County Direction of the National Archives of Romania-Satu Mare Direction (Satu Mare, Romania)

industry the socialists needed to direct their attention to the countryside. Romania was a largely agricultural country, and although industry grew immensely during the 1930s and 1940s, a large part of the population was still working the land for a living. Moreover, the countryside fed the cities and the still produced a considerable share of Romania's exports. The peasantry was throughout the decades not very close to the socialists, who spoke for and about the working class, attributing to the peasantry only a secondary role in the building of a new society (Hitchins, 2002). The relation was equally cold on the other side: the Socialist and Communist Parties were not very popular with the peasantry, who traditionally voted for the National Peasant Party (in Transylvania in particular) and who related more to the mystical traditionalism and nationalism of the Iron Guard than to the internationalism of the leftist parties (Orzac, 2007).

However, some recent studies (Bottoni, 2010) suggest that at least in Transylvania the amount of popular support for the party has been under-rated by post-socialist historians. Bottoni (2010) argues that because of its multi-ethnic component, the Party gained more legitimacy in ethnically mixed Transylvania. The class-based policies of the socialists seemed like a better choice than the divided and dividing policies of traditional parties. It is important to remember that even a mainstream party, such as the National Peasant Party, had in the interwar period a very strong nationalist rhetoric and at times openly anti-Hungarian and anti-Semitic discourses. Its brief alliance with the Iron Guard in the early 1930s discredited the organization even more, and this distrust accumulated with a fear of repercussion because the Hungarian domination of Transylvania between 1940 and 1944 pushed more popular support towards the socialists, who enthusiastically defended the Hungarian minority from the nationalist impulses of the Peasant Party's

leaders. Socialists and communists were also not completely unfamiliar with this more industrialized region. Workers were known to have left-leaning sympathies and in Satu Mare in the 1931 local elections the Socialists got the fourth place, while the Communists came fifth, right after the two mainstream parties and the Hungarian Party. Their combined votes outnumbered the Peasant Party, the Liberal Party and the Hungarian Party<sup>38</sup>.

Moreover, another aspect that explains the higher degree of support for the socialists in Transylvania is the violence of the interwar period and of the war. From 1938 Romania was an absolutist monarchy with no democratic institutions in place. The Iron Guard was pursuing aggressive tactics against minorities and mainstream political leaders, and news of pogroms and assassinations were not uncommon in the decade prior to the socialist takeover. Transylvania was also under Hungarian occupation and memories of the war and the Holocaust were all very fresh. Particularly tragic was the deportation of thousands of Jews from Transylvania and especially from the urban centers. Satu Mare had a considerable urban Jewish population, most of whom were deported to Nazi concentration camps in the spring of 1944, just a few months before the Red Army entered Romania and started advancing towards Northern Transylvania. In the next section I will discuss the fate of the Caraseu Jewry and of its landlord Sandor Mayer, most of whom did not get the chance to see the end of the war or its consequences. The deportation of the few dozen Jewish families from the village left its mark on the village.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ziarul Satu Mare*, no 26 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1931

The violence of the war was later used by the socialist state to condemn the previous fascist regime and set itself in opposition to it, but also it distributed the lands of the former Jewish inhabitants and used this to economically legitimize their existence.

### 3. THE JEWISH POPULATION

The war dislocated a number of people and Transylvania lost most of its Jewish population, who were deported to Nazi camps during the war. Satu Mare was an urban center and one quarter of its population of Jewish origin. Death trains from Satu Mare carried around 19,000 victims between 19 May 1944 to 1 June 1944<sup>39</sup> to Nazi camps such as Auschwitz and Birkenau. Looking through the files of Yad Vashem,<sup>40</sup> I retrieved the names of around eleven families declared to be living in Caraseu before and during the war, who were victims of the Holocaust. From my interviews I found that there were around thirty Jewish families living in the village, and only a few of them survived the war. Of the people I read about in the Yad Vashem files some were mentioned as agriculturalists, merchants, housewives and students. Some were married; others were single or were young children when they were taken away. According to testimonies from several villagers, they were all taken to the school building one night and their possessions were confiscated. Their trace was lost after the war and those who did not return were considered dead. Few came back and even those stayed for a short period before emigrating to other European Countries or to the United States. There are no

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<sup>39</sup> Source : “International Commission On The Holocaust In Romania”, Final Report retrieved 21.05.2011

<sup>40</sup> See online sources Yad Vashem online The Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names



Jewish families left in the village now and the only traces of their existence are the run-down synagogue, the mill (which was owned by a Jewish family) and the manor house of the Mayer family. From the decimated Jewish community of Satu Mare even more emigrated during the first years of the socialist regime. By 1977 only 500 ethnic Jewish people were living in the city. Sandor Mayer, the big landowner from Caraseu, was also a victim of the Holocaust (see Yad Vashem testimony). His wife, one daughter and his son all died in Auschwitz. Only one daughter survived, and she tried in vain to recuperate part of the family's belongings.

Her husband traveled to Caraseu right after the war and tried to sell part of the land to the villagers, together with the tools used to work the land. The Mayer estate was equipped with machines, in contrast to many of the villagers. On a note written by the socialist authorities regarding the land reform of 1945 we find that none of the transactions that took place between the villagers and the only survivor of the Mayer family were recognized as valid. The tools and land acquired by the villagers were left in their possession for a few years, just to be confiscated later and integrated into the collective farm.<sup>41</sup> The state became the beneficiary of all properties that were not reclaimed after the war. In one story retold by one of my informants, the daughter of a Mayer employee, I found out that her father was trusted with trunks full of goods from several Jewish families, who prepared for the worse during the war. They hoped to return

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<sup>41</sup> PCR County Committee, 1949, *Rapoarte de activitate si tabele nominale privind situatia gospodariilor agricole de Stat si situatiunea pe masini si tractoare pe judet (Nominal activity reports and tables on the situation and state farm machinery in the county)*, 23/1949:5-8, County Direction of the National Archives of Romania-Satu Mare Direction (Satu Mare, Romania)

and when they did not, the local police together with party activists seized their belongings left behind in the village.

There was a process of appropriation after the war and the main beneficiary was the state. Again the land and houses were distributed to the poorer villagers. Not only land and material goods were distributed, but the functions once filled by the Jewish population from the village were redistributed. The mill needed employees, the pharmacy, and the local store as well. Survivors of the war were offered chances to climb the social ladder by acquiring land and new jobs<sup>42</sup> and the state was still willing to offer them. This soon would pose a problem for the socialist authorities as they were willingly or unwillingly creating a more independent peasantry in the village and a new group of small professionals. Their new status was short lived: by 1952 all the small businesses were under state control, the distribution of services was assured by the state, and many of them became employees of the socialist republic.

Levy (2001) argues that the Jewish population was essential for the socialist party in Romania because they filled the ranks of the bureaucracy, after the administration was “cleaned” of employees considered to be loyal to the former regime. However, after the mass recruitments of 1945, when the socialists managed to enlist around 300,000 new members in the party, of which most were Romanians, the Jewish communists became dispensable. In Caraseu there were two party members of Jewish origin in the village, and they were amongst the first ever to join. They were recorded as small merchants without

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<sup>42</sup>.idem

further detail. Their trace is lost later in the party documents and in people's stories<sup>43</sup>. They were not mentioned as survivors of the Holocaust by my interviewees. What happened to them or their businesses remains unknown to me, but what is recorded is the transfer of land, jobs, and material goods from the Jewry of Caraseu to the villagers and later to the state. If the Jews became dispensable to the Communist Party after establishing itself in the country, their possessions in Satu Mare and in Caraseu were of great use to persuade the local community into a more submissive attitude towards the new local socialist authorities.

#### 4. LAND REFORM

A second land reform started in 1946, but on a less large scale than the one in 1921. First, the state nationalized resources of national importance such as forests. The property belonging to ethnic groups dislocated or deported during the war was also transferred to the state's national reserve. Usually, Germans were targeted because they were accused of fraternizing with the German troops; however, officially there were no cases of repatriation in the county of Satu Mare,<sup>44</sup> and all the Germans dislocated during the war were treated as cases that willingly left the country, when the German troops retreated. The Jewish population deported during the war also saw its property transferred to state

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<sup>43</sup>PCR County Committee, 1946, *Situatia cu privire la desfasurarea reformei agrare pe plasi si comune* (The situation on the development of the agrarian reform in regions and communes), 10/1946:1-19, County Direction of the National Archives of Romania-Satu Mare Direction (Satu Mare, Romania)

<sup>44</sup>PCR County Committee, 1947, *Planuri de munca, rapoarte de activitate, procese verbale privind activitatea sectiei Educatie Politica* (Work plans, progress reports, reports on department activity Political Education), 8/1947:78-79, County Direction of the National Archives of Romania-Satu Mare Direction (Satu Mare, Romania)

patrimony. Moreover, inventories were taken for all of the Mayer lands and goods, and by 1949 Mayer Sandor was fully expropriated and left just 50 ha of land. Moreover, all of the tools and the machinery belonging to his farm were confiscated<sup>45</sup>. Institutions were next in line for expropriation. Both churches in the villages “willingly” donated their land to the state<sup>46</sup> and most of the land appropriated by the state was distributed to the peasants in the village. By 1948 the state distributed 396 yokes to peasants and kept only 20 yokes as national reserve. In addition, it distributed 456 yokes from the Mayer estate<sup>47</sup>. Some works were done to improve the quality of the land and the pasture such as digging ditches to prevent the water from accumulating and leveling the pasture with the same purpose.

Many families in the village saw their land growing in size. However, by 1948, when the land reform in the village was finalized, the socialist state decided to start the collectivization of land in Romania. Levy (2001) mentions the different factions within the party that argued for various paths that socialization of the economy could take. Some of the members of the Central Committee supported a more gradual approach

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<sup>45</sup>PCR County Committee, 1947, *Rapoarte de activitate, procese verbale, situatii si alte materiale privind reforma agrara* (Activity reports, records, statements and other material on land reform), 10/1947:91, County Direction of the National Archives of Romania-Satu Mare Direction (Satu Mare, Romania)

<sup>46</sup>PCR County Committee, 1946, *Situatia cu privire la desfasurarea reformei agrare pe plasi si comune* (The situation on the development of the agrarian reform in regions and communes), 10/1946:1-19, County Direction of the National Archives of Romania-Satu Mare Direction (Satu Mare, Romania)

<sup>47</sup>PCR County Committee, 1948, *Rapoarte asupra gospodariilor agricole de stat precum si tabele nominale despre membrii comisiilor comunale pentru insamantarile de primavara din plasa Somes* (Reports on state farms and ratings on members from the communal tables for spring sowing in the Somes region), 89/1948:15-19, County Direction of the National Archives of Romania-Satu Mare Direction (Satu Mare, Romania)

somewhat similar to Lenin's New Economic Policy, where the industry would be under state control and a primitive socialist accumulation from the countryside would naturally occur under market mechanisms with some strategic state-driven policies such as extra taxation. The collectivization of land, although seen as vital for the definitive integration of the economy into a socialist system, would be postponed until the Party could become stronger and have more support from what was projected to be a larger working class. However, Gheorgiu-Dej, the First Secretary of the Central Committee, supported a different path by which the collectivization of land would be a top priority for the state and would have to start immediately. All of these debates ended, when Stalin personally urged the Romanian socialists to start the collectivization process as soon as possible. By the time the land reform was over, the appropriation of land by the state was officially launched (Levy, 2001).

Thus, the state authorities started a campaign of promoting collective associations, similar to the interwar Peasantist campaign to promote mass cultivation of land, mechanization, and to prevent the fragmentation of land. The economic autonomy of the peasants proved to be even more problematic for the socialist state, which was aiming to take control over the national economy and abolish private property. Economic autonomy meant independence from the state, while most of the peasantry was still practicing subsistence agriculture. And in 1948 after receiving more land without acquiring any debt, they seemed to be better equipped than in 1921 to resist the initiatives of the state to rob them of their livelihood and their meager surpluses.

## 5. COLLECTIVIZATION

The collectivization process in Romania as in other socialist countries (with the notable exception of Poland and Yugoslavia for different reasons)<sup>48</sup> was the first national project of the new regimes. In Romania it took longer than anywhere else in Eastern Europe (Verdery, 1983). It started in 1949 and it officially ended in 1962, three years before the projected deadline. The collectivization process was formally launched at the Communist Party's Central Committee plenary, held between 3-5 March 1949. In the first five years after the beginning of collectivization the state operated in stages that ranged from aggressive tactics to retreats (Levy, 2009). Taking into account the Soviet experience, where the process was initially swift and very brutal, the Romanian authorities decided to avoid bloodshed as much as possible and strove to win over an already skeptical peasantry. It was reported that even Stalin would have personally communicated to the Romanian socialists to avoid the Soviet model (Verdery, 1983). According to Levy (2009), the classifications of these stages were each characterized by specific measures. In the beginning the state heavily promoted the peasants' associations and cooperatives with tax exemptions and a 20 percent reduction in quotas, thus making this type of organization attractive to poor peasants, who were already heavily indebted to the state and were lacking proper tools to work their lands. In this case the state tried to antagonize the peasants as little as possible and the level of organization they imposed was minimal. More than 1000 requests were sent to Bucharest by October 1949, of which

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<sup>48</sup> Poland was not collectivized like the other socialist countries and also was arguably the most industrialized country in Eastern Europe [DDR?], while Yugoslavia took a different path under Tito, having a ["liberal" is not the word] regime with stronger opposition to Moscow.

just 10 percent were approved. The associations were supposed to work in consolidated land, but the land swaps created many problems in the countryside, where the peasants would not recognize the exchanges. Ana Pauker, the minister in charge with agricultural problems and the one responsible for the collectivization project, was a firm promoter of a peaceful approach to the process, but soon she was replaced by a more aggressive party member due to her illness and the beginning of her demise within the party. Alexandru Moghioros, the new Minister of Agriculture, pushed for the formation of 1000 new farms by 1950 and 30,000 peasant families joined the collectives. Without sufficient volunteers and cadres to promote the associations, the process slowed down. Between 1950 and 1952 Ana Pauker returned to the ministry and these two years were calmer and were reserved for the consolidation of the farms already established. The state reduced some of the repressive measures that it took in the previous period, and it released some of the imprisoned peasants and gave their lands back. The repression started again after her faction was purged and until 1953 a more intensive pace of collectivization was restored (Levy, 2009).

A period of stagnation started soon after Stalin's death and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Tax exemptions of 50 percent were offered to private owners and of 75 percent to associations. Special attention was paid to consolidating existing farms and assuring that there was a steady supply of food to the cities. At this stage, the state could not afford to totally antagonize the peasantry and to create much unrest because its power was not fully consolidated and after the Budapest revolution of 1956, which was only halted when Soviet troops entered the country, the authorities from Bucharest played a more cautious game with the peasantry. By the late 1950s a new offensive on the

countryside started and by 1962 much of the land in the country was being cultivated in collective or state farms. Collectivization required an enormous state apparatus with properly trained cadres and volunteers ready to convince the peasantry of the benefits of collective farming. The positions were not easy to fill because of people's low ideological preparation. The continuity between the old and new administration was a necessity, because the state needed to function. Old cadres were not educated to work in a socialist regime, but the state could not dismiss them and lose the precious knowledge they possessed.

In Caraseu the first association was created in 1950 in a period of relative calm. The first families to join the farm were not coerced, but persuaded with material benefits and privileges. Many of them were poor peasants who could use the tax breaks, the tools, and the land that the association was promising. In May 1950 twelve villagers from Caraseu (10 peasants and 2 workers) formed the first collective association in the village, contributing with land varying between 0,57 ha and 2,79 ha. In total, there were 17,13 ha of land. Together they had two horses and four cows<sup>49</sup> Regardless of this unimpressive participation, which was insignificant even for a small village of around 300 families, they received the full support of the authorities and managed to get land assigned to them from the most fertile parcels in the village, near the Somes' meadow. The Romanian Greek Catholic Church offered their house to be used as the farm headquarters.

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<sup>49</sup>PCR County Committee, 1950, *Planuri de munca, rapoarte de activitate, situatii si procese verbale privind activitatea politica in GAC si SMT in judetul Satu Mare* (Work plans, activity reports, statements and records on political activity in GAC and SMT in Satu Mare), 44/1950:1-7, County Direction of the National Archives of Romania-Satu Mare Direction (Satu Mare, Romania)



One year later in 1951 the whole village joined the collective farm, eleven years before the collectivization campaign was officially finalized in the country. According to Levy's (2009) collectivization timetable, the collective farm in Caraseu was established in a period when milder measures were used to promote collectivization. There are a few accounts of arrests, but no extensive stories of abuse or violence. The villagers mention that two or three rich villagers were arrested, because "they were loud mouths". There were few acts of open revolt, although there was widespread fear and opposition to the collectivization of land. There were rumors that the protestant Hungarian priest had started a campaign against the collective farm or that significant members of the community bragged that they would never join such an organization<sup>50</sup>. More significantly, the villagers mention administrative harassment, the constant work of persuasion of the cadres, and the impressions after the first harvest of 1950, when the newly formed association harvested impressive yields. The establishment of a model farm near the city of Satu Mare, some 20 kilometers from Caraseu, seemed to have impressed the villagers with its performances. The farm, inaugurated amongst the first in the country in 1949, was headed by a peasant woman by the name of Zidaru Maria. This was to say the least unusual, because she was from modest origins and a woman leading what seemed to be a very successful farm. V. M., one of the elderly women from Caraseu, recounts how Maria Zidaru came to the village to convince people and especially women to accept collectivization.

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<sup>50</sup> PCR County Committee, 1950, *Situatii si tabele nominale privind situatia gospodariilor agricole colective precum si cereri pentru formarea GAC* (Situations and nominal tables regarding the situation of the collective farms and of the requests to form collective farms in the county), 46/1950:1-11, County Direction of the National Archives of Romania-Satu Mare Direction (Satu Mare, Romania)

*“She was respected. The activists and the communist cadres were usually from outside the village. Women were worried that their children would not be taken care of. They were told that there will be a kindergarten where the children will stay, eat and sleep.”*

Others have less favorable memories of joining the collective farm. N.V. was the half-brother of the first collective farm leader.

*“The first families joined voluntarily. They took away the good land from people outside the collective. Not everybody could get in at the beginning. Finally, everybody got in. They made people write formal requests or they would write them for them. He [the brother] was carrying away bags of potatoes from the river shore. The doctor wrote the request for me. And when I looked at it I saw that’s it was written ‘N. I. on his own free will decided to join the collective farm’ How in the hell was that free will?! So this is how I was made to write that I am going on my own free will. It was ugly, many people cried. Even so my father didn’t want to join. He never did. They didn’t do anything to him because he was too old, around 80 years old. They didn’t want to join because they took away all their belongings. “*

The local schoolteacher also remembers the beginning of the collective farm as a tense period. He and other teachers were ordered to write slogans and replace them every two weeks. Moreover, they had to mobilize people for agricultural labor. But the collectivization process was very difficult, and he mentions how he was in charge of the propaganda in a neighboring village for three months but without success. People were not interested, but finally they joined because they were forced. The ones who refused to

sign were taken away to labor camps, the most infamous being the Danube-Black Sea Canal.

*“Do you know how it was? At the beginning when they started the collective farm it was good. They gave farm members produce according to their labor days, even nuts they received. But then, they started giving less. Do you know why? Because the farm leadership was reporting bigger production than it was. Because they were getting orders saying you need this amount of yield per hectare. But even if they didn’t produce it they had to report that they did. And when they made all the calculations, they were receiving seeds according to what they reported, and they supposed to distribute to the people according to what they reported. The rest went to the state.”*

The state was getting the amount on the paper, but the shortage was coming out of the peoples’ share and from the amount reserved for seeds. So it became worse and worse every year.

Another interviewee declared:

*“At the beginning the collective farm went well. But in the end, in the 80s it all fell apart. One activist said, when I was in Carei for instruction, ‘You people should be aware, that this communism will work as long as it works, but when people will realize that communism will turn into’ how did he say?.. ‘state capitalism’. What is state capitalism? State capitalism, he said, means that now it’s real communism. But it could turn into state capitalism. All the wealth that is produced by the collective farm stays in the collective farm. This is communism. But it might happen that the bosses from the*

*collective farm, the president would subtract more income than the ones who are working. So, he said, this is not socialism anymore, this is state capitalism. And it became state capitalism. And the minute it became that, we had the Revolution of 1989. That's why it happened. Because the leaders from the collective farm they worked as if the farms belonged to their fathers' [meaning they acted like the farm was their property]. Not belonging to the state, or to the people. And this is why the whole thing fell apart."*

Collectivization was implemented in Caraseu in around two years. According to my interviewees many of the villagers entered the collective farm not by their own free will but by being intimidated and left out. The harvest of 1950 was completely distributed to the members of the association and the example of model farms run by peasants in the near proximity of the village was used to legitimize the model of the collective farm. Moreover, the previous decades of propaganda for mass agriculture, mechanization, and cooperatives in the county prepared the ground to a certain extent for the socialist cadres. I will look now at the changes in labor practices and labor relations in the village that emerged with the establishment of the collective farm, and I will describe how the villagers perceived their work and role in this institution.

## 6. LABOR

In one of the Activity Reports submitted by a Party inspector in 1950 regarding the establishment of collective farms in the county of Satu Mare we find a series of general problems enumerated and solutions to solving these problems. The focus in this

particular report is on the organization of work in the farms. The general problems spotted with the organization of work in the collective farms were as follows:

- poor organization of the work
- not enough cadres for instruction
- disregard for the common goods
- superficial work ethic
- wasting of fuel and other common goods
- poor maintenance of machines and common areas
- ignoring the production plan set for the collective farms

And the solutions proposed:

- better ideological education of the cadres
- better organization of work using techniques similar to the ones employed in the Soviet solhoz, such as the introduction of work norms and socialist work competitions under the direction of the Party and the labor unions.
- standardization of work practices, usage of tools and usage of resources and common goods, according to the standards used in the USSR (for example, the amount of food allocated per cattle)
- standardization of land working techniques, including the amount of seed to be used per acre, tools to be used, fertilizers etc.<sup>51</sup>

The disregard for the common property is flagrant. Most of the issues enumerated in the report reflect a general attitude of disrespect and lack of interest in the performances of the farms, the common goods, and for the production plans set by the

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<sup>51</sup>PCR County Committee, 1950, *Planuri de munca, rapoarte de activitate, situatii si procese verbale privind activitatea politica in GAC si SMT in judetul Satu Mare* (Work plans, activity reports, statements and records on political activity in GAC and SMT in Satu Mare), 47/1950:13, County Direction of the National Archives of Romania-Satu Mare Direction (Satu Mare, Romania)

authorities. The peasants were not working for themselves, but for the state. Although the land donated to the collective farms belonged to them just months before, the peasants almost immediately dissociated themselves from their property. The solutions proposed to counteract the commitment issues of the peasantry were all different forms of increasing control over people's time, actions, and beliefs. Increased ideological education, standardization of time, work and tools, and increased competition amongst laborers aimed at shaping the peasantry's beliefs, at increasing the level of surveillance and control, but also at creating divisions in closely knitted communities. By standardizing the labor process the state did not only seek to better control the extraction of products from the farm, but also to discipline and organize the labor force according to the farm's needs.

Villagers would work on a norm system where for each type of task points were assigned according to the difficulty of the job, the amount of land to be worked, or the time necessary to complete the task. The system was not fully transparent and many of the villagers did not grasp the point system fully. Moreover, they would be informed about their accumulated points only at the end of the year. This system was prone to abuse as points were assigned to family members and friends, as favors, or in exchange for goods. This reinforced the social relations in the village, but it did not strengthen the already delicate relation between the state and the village.

One villager describes the norm system as:

*“They would tell the people how much a “norma” is, they would assign “norme” for each person. For example 15 acres of plowing a specific land would be 1 norma.*

*They would get money for each norma and a percentage of the harvest according to how much they worked. Depending on the year, the harvest, the weather, people would get more or less produce. At the beginning it went well, but in the 80s they would barely get anything.*”<sup>52</sup>

Another describes the points system and the loss of control over one's labor, reinforced by the inability to transmit the knowledge of working the land to future generations:

*“But these young people they can't make their own future. They didn't work. When we joined the collective farm, we had a future. We knew how to keep a household. But these [young people] when they were left alone after the collective farm...you know in the collective farm you were directed like in the army; the team leader [brigadier] would come and would say “Nah, there three people should go, over there four or ten women should go”. But it went well. But now it doesn't. The land is bare. And they made you work. You were measured. They made you work, to plow the land, for 15 acres. Not for money, but for points. With those points you couldn't go and buy yourself a palinka. Or go to the local shop. You were working for points.*”<sup>53</sup>

The description above is significant as it shows the preoccupation with passing knowledge in the village and the way in which this knowledge started to be lost more and more in the farm. The younger generations were losing their future, losing the little control they had for their own livelihood. The farm is compared with the army as one

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<sup>52</sup>Interview SV, Male, 78, Retired

<sup>53</sup>Interview, AI, Male, 91 years old, Retired

receives orders and has no authority.. Anecdotes about dodging work, theft, destruction are common in all of my interviews. One is tempted to see these as “foot dragging” strategies in the logic of Scott's (1987) weapons of the weak.

Resistance to the encroachment of the state over people's lives needs intentionality or a form of consciousness and premeditation. One might argue indeed that the peasants of Caraseu had few resources at their disposal to fight the state and to take over the means of producing goods. I have little to no evidence that such intentionality existed. I would argue instead that an increased process of alienation from one's work intensified under the collective farm. The space of control and dedication was elsewhere and most commonly was exercised in working the small garden that people were still allowed to own. Stealing from the farm was on many occasions with the purpose of supplementing resources used for raising veal, pigs, and for managing the private garden, not for sabotage or profit. The farm became a steady source of outside employment necessary to support the realm of the private plot. Although as in the interwar period this source was a more stable source of income, and during the collective farm it was the main source of income, the concern over the small plot that people rightfully owned surpassed the commitment they demonstrated to their work in the farm.

There were no riots in Caraseu when the collective farm was established, although the neighboring regions witnessed violent clashes starting in 1949. Ionescu-Gura (2010) describes the riots of Northern and Western Transylvania as some of the bloodiest in the country with thousands of people marching in villages and 28 executed only in 1949. The author attributes the cause of the riots to an incipient process of



proletarianization of the peasantry, when two measures taken by the central authorities in order to better extract the products of the harvest and to control the revenues allocated to the peasantry triggered violent responses and outrage in some of these villages. The two measures mentioned are the organization of the land into acres for the threshing of the wheat (in order to better supervise the process and monitor the quantities harvested) and the payment for harvesting offered in cash not in produce. Both of these measures were already in place in Caraseu starting in the interwar period. Although used in parallel with other forms of payment, and other ways of organizing the fields, waged labor and highly monitored field layout and labor were not uncommon on the Mayer estate.

The responses to the establishment of the collective farm in Caraseu were characterized by a “wait and see” attitude, mild opposition, but no open and violent reaction or sustained resistance. The village did not have the resources to engage in an open war with a powerful and repressive state that involved the military, the secret services, and the administration in order to intimidate and harass people into joining the collective farm. However, there was considerable variation of responses in the region, and some villages reacted in a very aggressive way to the standardization of work practices and to the payment methods proposed by the state. In Caraseu there was a history of waged labor, increased standardization of work and of work units. The local conditions prior to the collectivization of land influenced the reaction villagers had to the collective farm, as their attitudes and practices had already been in a transition before the war.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The collectivization of land in Caraseu was swift and relatively uneventful when compared to the brutality of collectivization in other areas of the country. The few dissident voices raised in the village were silenced with prison charges and threats, but the collective farm was established in just about two years and in a period of relative calm. The process was characterized by administrative harassment, an intense work of persuasion from communist cadres, and intimidation, but also by positive examples of model farms and their leaders, good yields and fair distribution of products in the first years of activity. I would argue that many people did not join the farm willingly, and except the seventeen families who formed the first collective association in the village few of them would have done so in the absence of coercion.

However, the reactions to the collective farm were relatively mild and they suggest an attitude of submission and even approval in some cases. Nevertheless, the villagers of Caraseu, once inside the collective farm, adopted only a half-hearted interest in their work and in the performance of the farm generally. Their previous experience with external and waged labor made the experience of working in a collective farm translatable, but it never succeeded in attaching the same positive values attributed to working one's own plot.

## CHAPTER VI:

### CONCLUSION

The villagers of Caraseu were starting to be exposed in the interwar period to more opportunities for outside employment, and they took these opportunities not only to supplement their income, but also to assure more stable revenue for their households. They remained conservative in their logic, but not in their choices. Stability was valued above all else but this no longer came only from land ownership. I believe like Gerald M. Sider (1986) that we need to understand agency and experience in order to understand social change, that we need to know “how people alter their social relations in order to change the conditions of their social existence” (1986:191). Village culture is not static in the face of change, but can be adaptive and assertive. Change is not commonly of their own making, and in the case of interwar Romania adapting to an increasingly centralized state on the one hand, and becoming exposed to more risks as markets fluctuated, governments changed, and policies came with more forms of employment coexisting and new values being attached to these forms of production.

Caraseu was integrated into a new state starting in 1918 and the relation villagers had with the new state was as much defined by their ethnic origin as by their class position and status. Hungarians deplored the change, fearing repercussions, while

Romanians rejoiced what they perceived as being the end of centuries of oppression. The land reform following the union of Transylvania with the Romanian Kingdom was just one of the many administrative, economic, and social policies passed by the new state. It impacted the peasantry considerably and it changed the structure of ownership in the country from one dominated by big estates to one where more than half of the arable land was fragmented into properties smaller than five hectares. The peasantry became more autonomous at first, but this impacted the economy negatively as subsistence agriculture decreased the yearly production of goods in Romania. For a state that needed to transfer capital from the countryside to the industry this posed a threat. Price scissoring and increased taxation only increased the misery of the peasantry and backfired as the peasants allocated more of their surplus to pay their dues to the state than to invest in proper tools and seeds. Owning a plot of land did not yield the results promised, and as the peasantry became more indebted and more exposed to price fluctuations and economic downturn, they resorted to external and waged labor to supplement their household income. In Caraseu working for the Mayer estate and having stable jobs in the city became the most reliable sources to subsidize the private plot.

The inter-bellum Romanian state embarked on a state-building effort that aimed at integrating the newly acquired territories within the Romanian state, but also at transforming the economy from an agriculturally dominated one to a more industrially intensive one. The peasantry was expected to rise to the occasion and modernize, to become more efficient and to create more surplus. The policies adopted by the state--ranging from giving credit for acquiring tools to reorienting some of the income from agriculture towards industry -- impacted the peasantry, the value of their labor, and the

ways in which they produced goods. The socialist state in this regard was in a similar situation in 1945, when it needed to build new institutions, to reprogram the economy and the population, but this time into a socialist system. The task was incomparably bigger when the socialists came to power. The types of changes envisioned in the late 1940s in their nature and scope surpassed the modernization project of the inter-war Romanian state. However, there were also similar processes in place, and I showed how in terms of labor and property relation, state building, and structural economic changes there were parallels that could renew the discussion on collectivization and the experience of state and regime change for small communities.

I examined changes in the structure of ownership, the transformation of the peasantry's status and labor practices, and the state interventions that shaped these changes in order to offer a new narrative of collectivization, one that starts with the First World War and not with the beginning of the socialist regime in Romania. I argued that it is essential to put collectivization in this broader historical perspective, because the three decades that preceded the process shaped the peasantry's lives in ways that ultimately produced a particular reaction to collectivization. The old peasantry was eliminated by the collective farm and although people were still living in their villages and they were working the land, their statuses changed from land owners to state employees and in the process social relations and labor relations changed. Their status and social relations reshuffled and their villages became production units. (Verdery, 1983; Lampland, 1995)

I showed that the Romanian interwar state was engaged actively in a transfer of capital from the peasantry to the industry, pursuing fiscal policies such as cheap credit,

high import taxes on industrial goods, and advantageous tax cuts that promoted the accumulation of capital in big companies. These measures had huge effects in the countryside as peasants were not able to access cheap long-term credit and were not able to develop their tools and working techniques. Underdevelopment was prevalent in spite of the country's rapid economic growth in the 1920s. With the economic crises hitting Romania in the 1930s, subsistence agriculture became even more volatile as a source of income. Waged labor became a safe haven. Resorting to waged employment changed people's attitudes towards work, although it did not completely alter the hierarchy between work on the private plot, which would assure more autonomy and self-reliance, and external work, which was subjugating the worker to the rules of the employer.

In a similar way the socialist state created the conditions for a more autonomous peasantry at the beginning of its own state-building process, an autonomy that was even more dangerous as it undermined the state's economic and political project. The socialists were involved in developing the industry, socializing the economy, and creating a loyal working class. Through the process of collectivization the state appropriated the land from the peasants and transformed the countryside into a landscape of agro-industrial units, employing agricultural laborers. The state controlled the production and the distribution process. Peasants became workers but they never subscribed to the worldview of the socialist state.

The question that guided my research and this paper was always related to the experience of social change. People in a small village in northern Transylvania were confronted with events beyond their control. Changes in states, wars, land reforms, fiscal

policies and economic crises were not of their own doing. But they did live through these events, they reacted to them and they built in the process a new way of understanding their surrounding and their experience. If many of these events seem paralyzing and were imposed, they did not rob the villagers completely of their agency. Their reaction to collectivization even if one of submission was not just a reaction (or lack thereof) to an authoritarian state. It was a constructed reaction and a form of adaptation to the historical circumstance. Tracing the changes in labor practices and labor relations allowed me to see how these changes were experienced on a very practical level. Labor offered a perspective that allowed me to integrate personal experience into the explanation and offered a lengthier perspective on the process of collectivization, that does not only start with the beginning of the communist regime in Romania but integrates previous decades that shaped people's lives and their thoughts.

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