The Contemporary Bulgarian Socialist Village: Investigations of Foreign Sociologists

IMPLICATIONS OF THE MULTICOMMUNITY PRODUCTION COOPERATIVE (AGRO-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX) FOR RURAL LIFE IN BULGARIA OR THE DEMISE OF THE KARA STOYANKA

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INTRODUCTION

Kara Stoyanka is a variety of apple that used to be common in the orchards of Kirilovo, a village in central Bulgaria. One winter morning in Kirilovo, my husband and I sat at a kitchen table with Petko Mincev1 tasting apples. He passed us slices of several varieties — his old favorite, the Kara Stoyanka, and some new varieties recently introduced by agronomists of the Fruit Enterprise of Agro-Industrial Complex Zagore. This enterprise has its offices in Kirilovo.

Petko doesn’t like the taste and texture of the new varieties. “Tell me, can these compare with the Kara Stoyanka?”, he wanted to know. To my taste they could, but I refrained from saying so. I knew that they had been introduced for their superior export market characteristics. When I mentioned this, Petko agreed. “But our production has gone down this year”, he argued, “because the young folks are tearing out the old orchards to plant these new varieties.”

Production of apples in the Enterprise had, in fact, temporarily gone down while the orchard re-planting brigade carried out its task. Nonetheless, as Petko would readily admit, his income as a cooperative farmer had gone up at the same time. This was possible because the Fruit Enterprise, based in Kirilovo, was only a section of a large Agro-Industrial Complex (AIC), an organization composed of diverse production enterprises — grain, orchards, vineyards, stockbreeding and others. In 1971, this AIC was established through the merger of two state farms and seven pre-existing cooperative farms, one of which was the old Kirilovo village cooperative farm. The resulting large-scale AIC can absorb the investment cost of “re-tooling” one of its enterprises without loss of income to its members.

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But Petko, an old timer among the cooperative farmers, still took pride primarily in his own village’s annual increases in production. A smaller crop hurt his pride. He couldn’t yet find a sense of accomplishment in a production unit as large as the AIC. Petko made the transition in identity from private peasant to cooperative farmer, but hadn’t yet fully adjusted to the next step, the transition to AIC member. He made the transition organizationally, but not yet emotionally. Hence, his ambivalence about the replanting of the orchards, and hence, at least in part, the source of his nostalgia for the Kara Stoyanka.

Among the people in Kirilovo, Petko Minchev’s hesitations were exceptional. For most people, the formation of the AIC and its consequences for the organization of their everyday labor were the natural and welcome culmination of their own deliberate effort to build a new way of life in the countryside. Others also like the Kara Stoyanka, and continue to grow it in their house yards. But they would not sacrifice for it their excellent working conditions, their new houses, the fine new public facilities in the village, nor the comfortable standard of living to which they have become accustomed. Nor would Petko himself, if given such a choice. His reluctance to accept the innovations of the young agronomists is representative of the difficult, sometimes painful process of leaving behind the familiar in times of rapid change. It can be seen as an incident in the complex process of the social transformation of the Bulgarian rural population, which I shall now review.

CLASS CHANGES IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

During the course of one century, the Bulgarian rural population has experienced a thoroughgoing process of class transformation. Leaving behind their serfdom within the Ottoman Empire, Bulgarians became, first of all, a population of mainly dwarf peasant proprietors. In socialist Bulgaria, after 1944, they became cooperative farmers. Now, Bulgarian society is going through a further process of development. A rural based working class is beginning to emerge, based upon the development of both agricultural and non-agricultural industries. Many cooperative farmers are becoming industrial workers. At the same time, the work on the cooperative farms themselves is being industrialized. The difference between rural and urban life styles is being greatly reduced.

Before turning to the changes presently in progress, it is necessary to begin with an account of their roots in the past.

I. Pre-1944 Experiences

Ottoman Times

Through the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the vast majority of Bulgarians worked on the estates (chiflik) of the Turkish landlords — cultivating their fields, performing their corvee labor, and often absorbing their blows. From the mid-nineteenth century on, numerous villagers were involved in the national liberation struggle to free themselves from the five-centuries old “Ottoman yoke” (as they call it). All the major issues of the “National Revival” phase of this struggle reached down into the villages, including the successful drive for a Bulgarian (rather than a Greek) Church and for the creation of a literature in the Bulgarian language. Writers and teachers established libraries, reading clubs, drama circles, and secular schools in the Bulgarian language, leading to a much higher rate of literacy than was common in peasant countries.
By the 1870's, Revolutionary Committees existed in a wide network of villages. Often entire Rods (joint families, similar to Yugoslav zadrugas) were involved in plotting against the Turks. In Kirilovo, there are villagers still alive whose grandparents remembered the uprisings of 1875-1876, the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, and the flight of the Turkish landlords from the village. As soon as the Turks were gone, they say, the villagers, led by their Revolutionary Committee, destroyed the watchtower of the landlords, from which overseers had scrutinized their labor in the fields.

1878-1944

General Conditions: After the liberation from the Turks, most Bulgarian villagers were able to acquire some land and become independent peasants. The removal of the Turks left Bulgaria without a class of very large landowners, as Turkish landlords had displaced the native Bulgarian landed aristocracy five centuries before. Though no landed aristocracy remained at liberation, there were indeed substrata within the peasantry. Bulgarian villagers who had been of special service to the Turks had been able to accumulate some resources of their own, which they used to obtain a larger share of the vacated land than other peasants. Initially these differences were relatively insignificant, but, as time went by, the normal vicissitudes of peasant life brought about increased stratification. There was also, eventually, some penetration of capitalist farming into the production of commodities such as cotton. Despite this, Bulgaria remained overwhelmingly a nation of small peasants from independence in the 1870s to the end to World War II.

Thus, Bulgarian rural people had more than 60 years to discover the possibilities and limitations of life as small peasant proprietors. Their small plots, worked mainly with wooden plows, were steadily fragmented by inheritance. Throughout their lives, people struggled to add a little more land to their holdings. Neighbors wrangled over boundaries and brothers over the division of property. Merchants, and grain and cattle agents exploited the peasants. Peasants often lost some or all of their land to the emergent stratum of rich-peasant-cum-moneylender. For the most part, the benefits of landownership brought the peasants bread and onions, a hut with earthen floor and a goatskin rug to sleep on. Except for such mutual assistance as existed within families, security if any sort was unknown. People died of common and readily curable illnesses if they couldn’t persuade a wealthier relative or employer to drive them in his carriage to a doctor in town.

Life became particularly intolerable during the Balkan Wars and the First World War, when the burden of taxation, the absence of the men, drafted to the front, and the requisitions of food and of livestock drove many people to the brink of starvation. In numerous villages, there were demonstrations by the women, demanding that the men be returned to their homes. By 1919, Bulgaria had also seen a soldiers’ rebellion, which had set up a short-lived Republic.

The Cooperative Movement It was under these conditions that the cooperative movement in Bulgaria began to flourish. The early village cooperatives included credit unions, consumer cooperatives, and cooperatives for processing and selling agricultural produce. A few of them even purchased machines such as threshers. In fact, the developing contradictions within the peasantry of that period can sometimes be seen in the stories of conflicts around such purchases — with wealthier peasants within a cooperative favoring and pushing through the purchase of equipment that was not a worthwhile investment for other members with tiny plots of land.

During the brief period of Agrarian Union (peasant party) government from 1921—23, the cooperative movement received considerable moral, legal and mate-
rial encouragement. Even after a fascist coup toppled the Agrarian Union government in June, 1923, and after the anti-fascist uprising (led by a Communist-Agrarian alliance) in September, 1923, and after the white terror that followed the failure of this uprising, the numbers and variety of cooperatives continued to increase.

In addition to credit and marketing cooperatives, several agricultural producers' cooperatives (cooperative farms) were started, one as early as the turn of the century, and others in the 1920's. These first attempts were short lived, but they provided a source of experience later when, during the years 1936—1944, a total of 66 new agricultural producers' cooperatives were established (Syulemezov 1976: 32—33). Twenty-nine of these cooperative farms survived right through the Second World War, and were still operating in 1944. Their accumulated experience (together with the diverse experiences of the Soviet Kolhoz in which Bulgarian villagers took a lively interest), were in turn an invaluable aid from 1945 on, when several thousand new cooperative farms were founded under socialist conditions.

The Anti-Fascist Struggle: In the 1920s and 1930s, during most of which time political repression by the state was fierce, there was a high level of progressive and anti-fascist political activity in Bulgarian villages. The communists and the left wing of the Agrarian party (often in alliance) had particular strength in the numerous land-poor foothill villages, which already had a revolutionary tradition dating from Turkish times. In these villages, peasant families commonly diversified their sources of livelihood during part of the year. Some members worked elsewhere as field hands, apprenticed themselves to a trade in the city, or took jobs in village workshops. Such activities tended to broaden the people's horizons. Some of them brought back to the villages the influence of urban revolutionaries. In Kirilovo, which had a woodworking enterprise, people remember strikes and May Day demonstrations, and the struggle for the eight-hour day.

During this period, many left wing political formations were outlawed and underground political activity, already familiar from other times in living memory, became necessary again. Reading clubs and drama circles resumed their revolutionary role, this time as centers for the dissemination of anti-fascist propaganda. Interrogation and imprisonment became common experiences for village communists and Agrarians. The youth of the villages read underground communist literature at their spinning bees, and turned their social events into fund-raising affairs to feed political prisoners. It is interesting to notice that all this occurred despite the persistence of the usual chronic personal enmities characteristic of everyday life among impoverished peasants.

During the Second World War, when the Bulgarian government was allied with Nazi Germany, the cooperative societies of all types, especially their youth wings, were giant reservoirs of resources for the underground anti-fascist activities — providing everything from food, clothing, and funds to recruits. Under the leadership of the Fatherland Front (the national coalition of anti-fascist parties and organizations), the cooperatives provided cover for the educational and organizing work of communists and other anti-fascists. The cooperatives shared this work with numerous other village organizations, particularly the communist-led Workers' Youth League, and also including drama circles, women's groups, and even the temperance societies.

By 1944, the year of the People's Uprising and the establishment of the communist-led Fatherland Front government, there were a quarter of a million participants in the anti-fascist resistance, including partisans and their active supporters (Bakuridjieiev 1977:24). This in a country of — at that time — about 7 million people, three-quarters of them rural (Central Statistical Office 1976:78). Thus, the young people who grew up in Bulgaria during the 1920s and 1930s reached 1944 equipped with a good deal of experience in cooperative action and collective struggle. Yet their live-
lihood still depended — in most cases — on the small peasant plot. In fact, after the war, 76 percent of the country’s arable land was in farms of under ten hectares, and most of these farms consisted of many scattered fields (Syulemezov 1976: 65).

II. After September 9, 1944 — Socialist Bulgaria

Getting Started

In Bulgaria, then, there were deep native roots for cooperatization well before the launching of socialist construction. But this did not mean that the task was easy for the organizers of the earliest cooperative farms, even after enabling legislation was passed in 1945. A referendum had to be held in each village, and the majority of its villagers had to approve before a cooperative farm could be organized in that village. Only after that could membership be recruited. In Kirilovo, one of the earliest cooperative farms to be formed, more than 80 percent of the people voted to allow the establishment of the cooperative farm, but only a few brave souls were willing to be among the first to actually join it.

Often it fell to the youth, particularly the communist youth, to persuade their elders to join. Mincho Enev Nenev, now an administrative worker in the AIC, was such a youth. As an orphaned boy, he had been working the land since the age of ten. At fifteen, he already belonged to the communist youth (Workers’ Youth League, at that time). He recollects the task of persuading his family to join:

“My own principal assignment, considering that I was only fifteen years old, was to work with my own relatives. At that time, my grandfather was still alive. When I told him that we should join the cooperative farm, he looked at me and said, ‘What are we going to do there?’ I told him that we would pool our land, livestock, carriage, and tools, as all the other members would do. Then we would work the land together. ‘You’re crazy,’ he told me.”

Mincho managed to persuade his grandfather, and after him an uncle, and then an aunt who were unable to work their land without Mincho’s assistance. But organizational problems only began with recruiting membership, as Mincho explains further:

“During the very first year, we recruited 180 out of 360 households into the cooperative farm. Nevertheless, even those who joined did so with a mixture of confidence and doubt. Their fathers and grandfathers before them had all struggled constantly to buy more land. The idea of giving up land, of cooperative farming — a collective way of work and life — was new to them. Sometimes, they joined with little understanding and, as members, continued to feel strongly attached to their own pieces of land and their own livestock. There were cases of people who insisted that they alone could properly care for the livestock that had been theirs. But many years have passed, and today you can’t find a single man who would take back his land and livestock if it were offered to him.”

They wouldn’t take it back today, of course, because the cooperative farms have amply proven themselves. But in the beginning, there were occasions when some people did take back their land. The cooperative farms were naturally not without enemies — enemies among the formerly substantial peasants (who lost their holdings above 20 hectares in the 1946 land reform and who had lost their labor supply.) and enemies among the Americans and British on the Allied Control Commission in Bulgaria who opposed the Fatherland Front government. There were many cases of sabotage on the farms — destruction of harvesting equipment and the like — and anti-cooperative-farm propaganda was extensive. It was written into the constitution of the cooperative farms that any member could withdraw after two years, and
receive back land and livestock equivalent to what he had put in. In 1947, several dozen members in Kirilovo did just that. They had been persuaded that their former poverty was mainly due to the war, and that they could now do very well on their own land. But, after working on their own for some months and finding themselves unable to match the standard of living of cooperative farmers, they returned to the cooperative farm, and brought with them most of the villagers who had not yet joined.

Such incidents of villagers' vacillation about pooling land were common. Although the majority of cooperative farms were organized by the people in a spirit of great enthusiasm, joining the cooperative did not instantly transform peasants into cooperative farmers. Their transition to a new class consciousness — as socialist cooperative farmers — was the result of a complex process of experiencing new socialist forms of social relations in their working lives, together with new forms of property relations. The eventual outcome of this process was the cooperative farmers' understanding that their personal interests coincided with the well-being of the cooperative farm as a whole.

From Peasant to Cooperative Farmer

Changes in Social Relations: In Kirilovo, the importance of the most immediate and obvious change in the work process brought about by cooperative farming — that henceforward work would be done largely in groups — was expressed by the villagers on the day they inaugurated the cooperative farm. That day, the whole village, laden with food and drink, turned out into the fields. Using a borrowed tractor decked with flowers, they plowed their first collective furrow. Afterwards, they ate, drank and celebrated in the fields far into the night.

In those early years, before mechanization, the cooperative farmers worked long and hard. Yet, in their autobiographies, they recall much pleasure in their new work situation. Todora Eneva Mineva, who was one of the poorest villagers in Kirilovo before cooperation, describes her experience in this way:

“Before the cooperative, when we worked in private fields, we were like animals — one person worked alone in one field, and another somewhere else at a great distance: we couldn’t even see each other. After we formed the cooperative, we were many people working together, especially when we were harvesting, so the days passed pleasantly. We joked and acted parts — someone would be a bridegroom, someone else a son-in-law. My friend Radka and I always worked near each other, singing. We were doing collective work then. When we walked to the fields, we would gather flowers and put them in our hair, and go to work happy.

I still feel the same. If my husband says to me, ‘Don’t go to work today; there are chores to be done at home’, or if I have to go somewhere, I feel badly that I’m not at work.”

From the perspective of the brigade leaders, who were organizing the work teams, getting the teams started was a somewhat less idyllic process. In fact, they often nearly tore their hair out, sitting up well into the night trying to figure out who should be in which group when, for example, cooperative farmer Minka had announced that she would refuse absolutely to work if cooperative farmer Radka were placed in the same team with her. Neighbors with long-standing dislike of one another did not miraculously become fast friends overnight. Skill and talent in solving these nitty-gritty workday organizational problems were absolute requirements for the newly emerging leadership.

In fact, the development of leadership and of the relationships between the cooperative farmers and the leaders they chose was a significant element in the evolution of new work processes. Villagers grasped the fact that their increasing standard of living derived, in part, from the productivity of their particular brigade and, in part,
from the productivity of the entire farm, and they came to understand their individual stake in the quality of the planning and leadership they found among themselves. Leaders — both those in formal roles, such as brigade leaders, and those team members who stood out in quantity of production or in innovativeness — began to be rewarded with esteem and many kinds of formal recognition. This is so in the present day as well. For instance, particular songs in village concerts are often dedicated to a brigade leader or an outstanding worker.

Pooling of fields brought a more rational organization of land and labor, and consequently a rapid rise in the standard of living. New houses were built by a masons’ brigade drawn from the cooperative farmers in Kirilovo. Food became plentiful, and more varied. Soon, mechanization of some of the most arduous tasks was possible. As the cooperative farmers began to experience these benefits of working together, they began to take pride in their collective production and its results, and in their individual contribution to that.

Their personal identity came to be expressed increasingly through this pride in the productivity of successively larger units of which they were a part — their work team, their brigade (a unit of several work teams), their entire cooperative farm — even, to a degree, the society as a whole. “Machinery freed some of our working hands”, a cooperative farmer explains. “We cooperative farmers had to assure our members that the machines would not leave them without work, and we had to take best advantage of our new possibilities. So our cooperative farm began to produce early tomatoes for export. Thus, we gave our standard of living a large boost. And we served the nation as a whole at the same time.”

This period of building up the cooperative farms was a time of intense activity for the people. Even decades later, the atmosphere of excitement permeates their accounts of those days. Meeting together night after night, they confronted and solved entirely new problems, totally outside their previous experience as private peasants:

“How shall we organize the process of trading land with people who are not joining the cooperative farm, so that the cooperative’s land can form a continuous block?”

“How can we make use of the Soviet tractor we are being given, when only one man in the village knows how to drive and repair machines?”

Industry has been nationalized, and for the time being we have integrated the village factory as part of the cooperative. Can we find a workable way for wage workers and cooperative farmers to operate as part of the same unit? [They couldn’t.]

Our youth are going away for several months at a time on volunteer construction brigades — building dams, roads, whole new towns — and returning with new skills and high enthusiasm. How do we integrate them into the work of the cooperative farm? Should there perhaps be a separate youth brigade to experiment with and demonstrate mechanization? [There was, and the youth played a leading role in introducing mechanization.]

If we use our land for the crops they are most suited for, we must begin to buy some of our food from outside the farm. Are we prepared to do that?

We are growing, and receiving in payment from the cooperative, much more than we can consume now, and spending much time — as individuals — selling our surplus in the city market. Also, we want to grow some crops for export. Should we go over to paying ourselves in cash? It makes more sense. But we want to see the actual products of our labor.

The Communist Party (at all levels — national, district, local) is playing a leading role in guiding the process of socialist construction. Leadership in the village is also coming from other bodies — the Agrarian Union, the Fatherland Front, the municipal council (sovet), the cooperative farm assembly and standing management committee, the
team and brigade leaders, and others. How do we sort out what the respective responsibilities of all these bodies should be, both in relation to production and to other aspects of community life?"

Working together during the days, and grappling with problems such as these in the evenings, the cooperative farmers became accustomed to gathering together with their work mates. The latter gradually became their most important reference group. Even a good part of leisure social life came to be organized around work-group relationships (often overlapping with neighborhood ties), and work-related occasions, rather than around family and church events. The occasions for social gatherings as well as their content changed. Together, members of a work team spent holidays on a hike, retracing the route of a heroic partisan band of the region. Or, using their brigade’s bonus for high production, they took a vacation together journeying to another part of Bulgaria, where they stopped along the way to observe the organization of production at other cooperative farms or experimental stations.

Experiences such as these played a part in the formation of a class of cooperative farmers out of the peasantry. The cooperative farmers themselves are very conscious of the change and how it came about, and they see it as an irreversible process.

The Transformation of Property Relations: The developing socialist consciousness of the peasantry, as they went through the steps of building the cooperative farms, was integrally related to the building up of socialist property. Concretely this means that, as time went by, more and more of the material base upon which their livelihood depended had been accumulated by them as a collective, and less and less of it was derived directly from the property (land, tools, animals) which they had originally pooled.

When the cooperative farms were first established, the cooperative farmers were paid not only on the basis of work done (that is, a share of the farm’s production, based on work-days accumulated), but also in rent for the land they had put into the farm. The cooperatives had hardly any collective property in the form of machines, buildings, irrigation works, and the like. Acquiring such property was an essential step towards completing the socialist foundation for production.

Kirtovo people tell, over and over, the story of their first endeavor in collective construction, the building of the cooperative farm barns. These were needed to house the livestock, which they had pooled, but which were still being cared for in each member’s sheds. They tell of their day and night efforts, carrying the stones little by little from the hills, and how they competed to see who could keep working the longest. They show the buildings — now used for offices and machinery repair shops — with a continuing pride. Clearly, these buildings were an urgent practical necessity of the time. But the frequency with which people continue to refer to their construction demonstrates that they had a significance beyond their immediate utility — that is, their great political importance as a first step in establishing the collective productive property of the cooperative farmers.

In developing their material base, Bulgarian cooperative farms received direct assistance from the state. State support for cooperative farming was based on the understanding of its absolute necessity for the development of the country. At the Fifth Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1948, the leader of the party, Georgi Dimitrov, had said:

"The growing needs of industry, of the rural population, of the army cannot be successfully met by individual, petty-commodity and unproductive farming. This poses point blank the question of the socialist reconstruction of agriculture at the same time as the socialist construction and development of industry (Syulemezov 1976: 63)."

Considerable assistance was channeled to the cooperatives through the state farms, which provided improved seed, saplings and breeding stock as well as, very
important, models of efficient forms of labour organization. A decisive contribution was made by the machine and tractor stations (or MTSs), which were established to give the cooperative farms access to mechanized equipment (for a token fee). The MTSs also provided specialists who operated and maintained the mechanized equipment, and who accelerated the process of teaching the farmers mechanical skills.

Formal education also played an important role in developing the cooperative farm. Youth from the cooperative farms were selected to study at agricultural schools and to return with knowledge of modern agronomy. Special courses were developed to train chairmen of cooperative farms, accountants, team leaders (and eventually machine operators), and to provide them with organizational skills they hadn’t needed when they were peasants coping with only five hectares.

With state aid as a catalyst, cooperative farms were able to turn seriously to the mechanization of production. At the local level, leadership and cooperative farmers were united in the desire to lift the heaviest labor off the backs of the people, and to increase the productivity of farming. Dimo Kirev, a leading Communist Party cadre in Kirilovo in the 1950s, described the process in this way:

"I must point out that our cooperative farm was one of the first in the district. It was founded in 1945. People, not only from our district but from all over the country, came to learn from our experience. We had particular achievements in the mechanization of labor, more specifically in the gathering in and the threshing of the crops. We bought a big combine-harvester of great capacity, which ousted the threshing boards I told you about. Besides, we made some improvements to it, which reduced by eighty the number of workers engaged in threshing. The sheaves were fed mechanically and the grain was carried straight into the bins with the help of electric motors. In this way, the hardest physical work, that of carrying the grain on people’s backs, was eliminated."

And here is how one of the ordinary cooperative farm women viewed the same changes:

"At the beginning, when the cooperative farm was organized, it was like starting a new house. We didn’t have much at first. We didn’t have much machinery, for instance. We were working with oxen and horses, and of course it was hard work. The only machine we had was a thresher. We had to gather the grain into bunches, then move them to the thresher, lift them, and feed them into the machine. That’s what I was doing. Then we gathered the straw that was left form the threshing and loaded in into ox carts. Everything was done by hand. Now, we have combines, of course. At harvest, we don’t have to drive the horses all day, with the sun burning, and the dust. Now work is easy; there are no such tasks as carrying bunches of grain on our backs for long distances; that’s all done by machine."

Introducing mechanized farming was not always an easy task. Mincho Enev Nenev, quoted earlier, was leader of a youth brigade in the village during this process. He explains some of the causes of initial resistance to mechanization, and the role of the youth in overcoming it.

"At that time, we still worked with animal power, supplemented by a single tractor of our own and two others which were lent to us by the MTS.

I want to mention here that we young people were always the initiators and the most active supporters of innovations in our work, including the use of new machinery. For instance, when reapers and sheaf binders were being introduced, the cooperative farmers, both men and women, put up strong opposition to them. When our first combines arrived, they too were resisted by the cooperative farmers, who expressed fears of losing the ripe crop. In fact, they didn’t know how to operate them properly that first season, and in the end all cooperators, a thousand strong, had to pitch in to take in the harvest by hand."
So mechanization of agricultural work made its way with some difficulty at the beginning. But the young people welcomed new machines, and it was we who worked shifts on them, and succeeded eventually in showing the people how it was done. We, the young people, were the mechanizers.

Afterwards, the reason that cooperative farmers gave for continuing to resist the machines was that they spilled too much grain. This, of course, was only a pretext. The underlying reason was their fear that if we began to use machinery they would be left without work. The machines would do the job better, and replace their hand labour. They objected vehemently to our use of the machines, and took it for granted that their objections would lead us to abandon their use.

We didn’t give up the machines. But we did have to find ways to resolve the people’s anxieties. In 1950, most of our factories and plants had not yet been built, so our people couldn’t go to work in industry. And it is true, of course, that mechanized agriculture reduces the labour required; that’s why we wanted it. In short, we had to create other productive work for the hands we had freed.

Our youth brigade led in the introduction of a variety of scientific techniques for the improvement of production, which utilized our available manual labour. We hand-pollinated some of our field crops in order to utilize pollens produced from improved selected seed. We undertook the production of early tomatoes. These we started in pots made of manure, so that we could later transplant them into the fields right in the pots, a new method at the time. (Now, we have hothouses for this purpose.)

This early production gave work-days to our members, and increased our overall productivity and income. The early tomatoes were also a great help to the state, which could export them.

The tomatoes we produced turned into machines. That is, we exported tomatoes, and imported machines in exchange. The tomatoes also reassured our cooperative farmers that the use of machines would not cause them to be cast aside.

That period was the beginning of the work I have continued for twenty-five years—always talking to people, persuading them of the new when the old holds them back—that has been my work.

This then is how matters stood in 1950.”

I should mention here that all Bulgarians who described the mechanization of agriculture to me pointed out that it could not have been possible at such an early stage, when Bulgarian industry was just beginning to develop, without the massive assistance of the Soviet Union—in supplying farm machinery, irrigation equipment, and the means for building plants for fertilizer and the like, as well as (perhaps most importantly) training Bulgarian scientists and technicians to carry forward further development.

The introduction of machinery led to a higher standard of living in the countryside, and gave the cooperative farmers more leisure time, allowing them to enhance their cultural development and education through study circles, special courses, and local artistic activities. This, in turn, prepared them for further technical developments and improvements in the organization of work.

Mechanization of agriculture in Bulgaria is now virtually complete, and extends even into the combining of grapes and the picking of fruit. Mechanization provided the material foundation for the next and crucial stage in the development of Bulgarian cooperative farms, the period from 1958 to 1962, during which an advance to larger scale cooperative farming became possible.

In a dozen years, the first stage of cooperatization had been completed. Over a million tiny farms of prerevolutionary Bulgaria, 42 percent of them under three hectares, had been replaced by 3,200 cooperative farms, averaging 1,100 hectares of arable land (Syulemezov 1976:77).
Then, between 1958 and 1962, a number of dramatic steps were taken to raise farming to a new level. Most significant of these steps was the decision to overcome the economic and technical limitations of small, village size cooperative farms by merging them into larger units, each composed of several villages. During the years 1958—1960, the 3,200 small village level cooperative farms were reorganized into 800 large, highly mechanized, market-oriented, and economically stable units. These new, larger cooperative farms averaged 4,500 hectares of arable land (Syulemezov 1976:77). By 1962, the enlarged farms had accumulated sufficient resources to purchase the agricultural machinery from the MTSs, and absorb the specialists who had worked for them. The farms thus took charge of their own mechanization. An upsurge of specialization and concentration of production followed. Changes were made in the organization of labor, as well as in forms of payment. Payment was now made in cash and was based on the productivity of labor, as it is in industry. Farm productivity rose markedly, and with it the incomes of the cooperative farmers.

By this time, the land rent had become an unimportant component of individual farmers’ income. During the years following 1958, rent payments were gradually reduced, by decisions of the general meetings of cooperative farmers (Prumov 1976:43). By the end of 1961, they were entirely abolished. Thus, the post-1958 process of mergers made possible the completion of the socialist material foundation for cooperative farming, which was now based entirely on collective property.

The groundwork for the possibility of these decisions — for mergers, for the elimination of land rent — had been laid in the previous period. This groundwork consisted of the building of collective consciousness and mutual trust through the face to face relationships in the village level cooperative farms. These relationships had given the people the confidence and ability to take new steps, and these new steps in turn had altered the very nature of the collective experience. From the small scale production cooperative, in a setting where everyone knew and was in daily contact with everyone else, the farmers moved to a largescale, scientifically managed cooperative farm, in which specialized work teams were drawn from a group of several communities.

This first process of mergers prepared the way for the transition to yet a much larger scale of farming soon after, in the formation of the Agro-Industrial Complexes. The first mergers had so profoundly changed the organization of everyday life that most people were able to casually adapt to the later mergers into the AICs. The step by step changes in the actual material basis of life were dialectically related to the development of people’s consciousness. In the teams and brigades of the village level cooperative a sense of the unity of “mine” and “ours” began. From this starting point, identification with an even larger collectivity had become possible. Out of the peasantry had grown a socialist class of cooperative farmers.

**Cooperative Farmers and the Working Class**

At the time of the nationalization of industry late in 1947, ordinary peasants — village communists — presented themselves at the local mill and small village factory in Kirilovo to take possession of them on behalf of the people. In Kirilovo and elsewhere, peasants often took the keys to such enterprises from the very landowners for whom they had worked just a short time before. Another decade passed, however, before industry in the towns and cities developed to the degree that it began to draw large numbers of people out of the villages. In 1956, over 70 percent of the working population still lived in the villages and was employed in agriculture. By 1965, however, more than half the working population was already in the cities (Central Statistical Office 1976:2). 48.7 percent of working people were wage and salary earners, and only 37.5 percent remained cooperative farmers (Todorov 1978:14). The
new urban work force, mostly young people freed by the mechanization of agriculture, was absorbed into industry (as well as into the considerably expanded professions and services). As a result, a greatly increased working class developed in the towns and cities — young people with one foot still in the villages.

The friendship and intimate connection between urban workers and rural people in Bulgaria had begun to grow as early as 1945, when brigades of workers from the cities began to spend free days in the villages, contributing their labor and technical skills to the development of the cooperative farms. During the late 1950's and through the 1960's, this connection developed into a strong interpenetration between the working class and the class of cooperative farmers. Young urban workers returned to their villages on free days (as they still do) to help on the land, or commuted daily from their village homes to the city. For their part, more and more cooperative farmers came to have relatives in the urban working class, whom they visited in the city, and with whose life they grew familiar.

One phase of the social transformation of the country involved cooperative farmers leaving the land and becoming workers. Now, further changes among cooperative farmers are occurring. As a result of the industrialization of agricultural work itself in the AICs, the lives of the remaining cooperative farmers are increasingly resembling those of workers. The class differences between cooperative farmers and workers are diminishing.

Current Developments. Since 1971, Bulgarian cooperative farms have been completely reorganized and consolidated into 168 new Agro-Industrial Complexes (AICs), together with 18 Industrial-Agrarian and Research-Production Complexes² (Todorov 1978: 14). The AICs now cover the entire countryside, and encompass all of Bulgarian agriculture. Each AIC comprises several dozen villages, and cultivates an average of 25,000 hectares of arable land (Bakurdiev 1977: 115). A Communist Party document of 1976 succinctly summarizes the purpose of this reorganization:

"...to put agriculture on an industrial basis... to lead... to the transformation of agricultural labour into a variety of industrial labour, to an increasing closeness between state and cooperative ownership, to the formation of a unified socialist ownership. This process helps to bring about a reduction in the social group of cooperative farmers and a growth of the agrarian section of the working class (Central Committee of the BCP 1976:9)."

On these new large-scale cooperative farms, agricultural work has already assumed many of the characteristics of industrial production: the socialization and specialization of labour, concentration of single crops in orchards and fields that each cover hundreds and even thousands of hectares, and mechanization of almost all productive processes. Soon the AICs will coordinate all phases of food production — from research to fields to processing; from packing or canning plant to marketing.

In addition, under the Industrial-Agrarian Complexes, new industries and branches of existing ones are being located in the villages. Many of these are not related to the processing of agricultural products. They are intended to utilize rural labour that continues to be freed by the further mechanization of agriculture, and particularly to absorb the village youth who now have technical skills. These rural factories will reverse the growth of urban congestion, and allow people to work in industry while enjoying the pleasant conditions of village life.

One of the outstanding characteristics of socialist construction in Bulgaria is the willingness of the planners and the people as a whole to take daring new steps, to experiment widely, and also to freely reject unsuccessful experiment and adopt forms of organization that have proven themselves in practice. This attitude was present from the beginning in the structuring of the AICs. Rather than having a uni-
form structure from the outset, the AICs were organized in different manners, in order to discover which was most workable.

In most AICs, the component cooperative farms continued to exist as legal units and loci of work, with the AIC only taking care of overall planning of new, large-scale agricultural tracts. The component cooperative farms gradually specialized and concentrated their production, establishing the new large tracts: perhaps 2,000 ha in wheat, 1,000 ha in orchards or vineyards, and so on, according to their conditions.

Those AICs that maintained the existence of component farms made good progress. But they faced some of the same organizational difficulties that had led to the establishment of AICs in the first place. That is, in the pre-AIC period, many cooperative farms had experimented with setting up large inter-cooperative enterprises, for example in livestock production. But the coordination of production based on separate farms of different size, different resources, and so on, led to complex problems. Questions arose such as who should provide how much input and of what kind, and how the income should be distributed.

As a way out of such problems, twelve AICs were organized quite differently, along the lines of *specialized enterprises* rather than component farms (Prumov 1976: 70). AIC Zagore, which includes the village of Kirilovo, was one of these. From the beginning of the AIC in 1971, production brigades belonged to the AIC enterprises, not to component farms. AIC Zagore set up enterprises for mechanized production of grain, for swine production, for vineyards, for orchards and for vegetables, as well as for transport repairs.

This type of structure provided the best results in the organization of labour, and in a number of other spheres. It was also the best suited for the process of establishing, within the domain of the AIC, industrial enterprises such as processing plants.

In February 1975, the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party made a historic decision to begin the gradual transition to this enterprise or “branch” form of organization of all the AICs. Soon afterwards, all the AICs were brought under a new coordinating body, the National Agro-Industrial Complex. This “Complex” embraces all agricultural production, food and tobacco industries, service branches (such as irrigation, farm machine repair, fodder supply), scientific research and design, related educational areas, and environmental protection. Since this step was taken, several AICs have already become Research-Production Complexes. They include all phases of production, from their own research institutes to their own processing plants.

Undertaking such major reorganizations in rapid succession is not always easy. Many problems, both predicted and unexpected, inevitably arise. Of current concern are problems in working out the appropriate levels of administration and responsibility for the various domains of activity. For example, village municipal councils (or soviets) and village Party Committees still have some responsibilities for production on their territory. But these responsibilities sometimes overlap with those of the AIC. At present, experiments are underway to determine what should be the respective responsibilities of village municipalities and of AICs.

The AICs have brought a number of changes to their members. For instance, AIC members are still technically cooperative farmers, yet they now belong to trade unions. Some still experience difficulty in adjusting to the new scale of organization and new level of collectivity. For example, there is the truck driver, who drives at breakneck speed to chalk up kilometres on the record of the transport enterprise, and in so doing damages the fruit produced by the same AIC’s orchard enterprise, to which his parents belong. And there is Petko Minchev, who is unhappy about the demise of the Kara Stoyanka.
Many old problems have been solved, and entirely new ones have appeared. Todor Zhivkov, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, in his report to the XIth Party Congress, commented as follows on these strains of rapid transition:

“The rapid pace at which we have reorganized our agriculture and industrialized our country has shifted around the population. The old villages and small provincial towns in which all the people knew one another exist no more. The old patriarchal way of life was too poor, too narrow for us to feel sorry about its passing. But the new lifestyle has not yet properly taken shape so that we may feel satisfied and untroubled (Zhivkov 1976:77-78).” One of the present-day challenges is to work out these problems of adjustment.

CONCLUSION

In thirty years time, Bulgarian cooperative farming has developed to the degree that it is very difficult to speak of a Bulgarian “peasantry”. Can we think of people as “peasants” who operate computers, which can quickly provide recommendations for the application of fertilizers appropriate for all the varying conditions of perhaps 40,000 hectares of crop land?

Bulgaria’s policy of committing great efforts to developing the villages has born fruit. Today’s young cooperative farmers already resemble workers — in the nature of their work and in their education and life style — much more than they do peasants. Frequently, they are specialists: zootechnicians, agronomists, agricultural economists, agricultural aviation workers, or they are members of “mechanized production brigades”, which combine-harvest grapes or wheat, machine-cultivate vast orchards, or run automated enterprises that raise 50,000 swine. Most of them have at least a specialized secondary education, and often a higher education as well. Their incomes are the same as industrial workers with equivalent skills. They belong to trade unions, have maternity leaves, enjoy paid vacations, and retire on pensions.

The cooperative farmers live in new (or well-renovated) houses in villages which have electricity and almost always running water, and which are on paved roads with excellent bus connections to nearby towns and cities. Despite easy access to towns, a typical village of 1000 people has its own schools, day care center, medical clinic with a fulltime doctor and nurse, shops, restaurants and tavern. Such a village also has a library-cultural centre, complete with a theatre-meeting hall, in which villagers see an international repertoire of films and a variety of travelling music and theatre groups of the highest quality. They themselves participate in amateur musical and theatrical activities, and read a great variety of books and periodicals.

A cooperative farmer’s household normally includes people of varied occupations — perhaps a combine driver, an agronomist, a teacher, and an industrial worker (employed in a local industry, or commuting to the city).

In Kirilovo, Elenka Marinova Ivanova, leader of an orchard work team, was, at the age of 39, the youngest person in the entire cooperative farm who was without a specialized education, and was still engaged in full-time manual labour.

As a result of the high level of mechanization in agriculture, the cooperative farmers are acquiring skills similar to those of workers. Also because of mechanization, the cooperative farmers are decreasing in number. In 1965, they were 37.5 percent of the population, in 1970 only 28 percent. By 1975, when the AICs had existed only four years, cooperative farmers constituted only 14.4 percent of the working population (Todorov 1978:14; Zhivkov 1976:69). The remainder of the population was composed of wage and salary workers.
North Americans customarily view changes such as the mechanization of agriculture, the growth in the size of farms, and the vertical integration of the food industry as processes leading to rural depopulation and to a decline in the quality of rural life. Perhaps the most important thing I learned in Bulgaria is that under socialist conditions the disappearance of the old peasant way of life does not necessarily imply the decline of rural life. In Bulgaria, it has implied the planned transformation of rural life, and its development to a new form, which will eventually be based on a section of the working class who happen to live in the countryside.

Notes

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1Petko Minchev is a pseudonym — to spare him any embarrassment my description of his attitudes might cause. Actual names are used for all other persons (and places) mentioned.

2This number has undoubtedly changed somewhat since the time of writing, as there is a constant process of reorganization in progress in the country.

3A high degree of concentration was thus rapidly accomplished. For example, in 1970, vegetable crops were grown in 17,000 places. These are now concentrated on 260 tracts (Prumov 1976:67).

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