

Aaron Hale-Dorrell, *Corn Crusade: Khrushchev's Farming Revolution in the Post-Stalin Soviet Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. pp. v+328. 11 figs. ISBN Hbk. 9780190644673 Hbk. £47.99.)

*Corn Crusade* provides fascinating insights into the agriculture, society, and politics of the Soviet Union after Stalin. Aaron Hale-Dorrell, an independent scholar, grew up in the Corn Belt of the American Midwest. The neglected role of corn (maize in British English) in the post-Stalin transformation of the Soviet Union was a natural choice of topic. His book reports many intriguing similarities as well as differences in the part that corn has played in such different settings.

Chapter 1 establishes that, on Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet agriculture and food supplies were in a pitiable state, demanding reforms. Chapter 2 shows how the corn technology became part of the long Soviet transition to an "industrial model" of farming, which would rely increasingly on external sources of scientific expertise, equipment, chemicals, and feedstuffs. It was intended to bring together soil science, plant genetics, synthetic fertilization, machinery, and animal husbandry to improve the people's diet. In the transition from Stalin's rule, the corn technology also became an instrument of political rivalry.

Chapter 3 tells how Khrushchev's plan was dashed through sharp changes in agricultural policy, including a radical expansion of land sown to corn. The corn campaign met obstacles and made mistakes. Industry failed to supply the expected machinery and fertilizers. Inappropriate adoption and overenthusiasm fed resistance. Farm managers and rural officials cheated in order to fulfil the plan on paper. Officials assumed that, like all campaigns, this one would pass. It did pass, but not before contributing to Khrushchev's sudden dismissal.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with topics that then arise: corn in Soviet consumer culture, and corn in the patriotic education of young Soviet citizens, sent every summer to help bring in the harvest (as the author did in the US Midwest at a similar age).

Chapter 6 considers the Soviet collective farm, which began in the 1920s as a formally cooperative organization before falling under control by the party and the secret police. Under Khrushchev the collective farm lost many distinctive features, coming to closer to the model of an ordinary Soviet factory. In the process, farmers exchanged the original set of perverse incentives for another set, more typical of the Soviet state-owned sector. This was also part of the Soviet transition to the industrial model of farming.

Chapter 7 sets out the context within which Soviet farmers had to cope. Plant science still suffered under the false ideas of Trofim Lysenko about the inheritance of acquired characteristics. In industry, Soviet factories supplied machinery and fertilizers for corn cultivation only in fits and starts. Everything was framed by bureaucracy: as the farmers'

environment became more normal (in Soviet terms), so did their behaviour.

Chapter 8 and the Conclusion sum up Khrushchev's contribution. Despite ridicule, the corn crusade was not pointless. Soviet corn farming survived the setbacks. It made permanent progress, for which Khrushchev deserves personal credit. At the same time, Hale-Dorrell maintains, he should not be blamed for all the setbacks that destroyed his reputation: the author's point is that Khrushchev was not the all-powerful totalitarian dictator of the Cold War stereotype.

The story of corn could also be set in another context, that of the Soviet adoption of foreign production technologies that ranged from household appliances to aerospace. Just to acquire, replicate, and adapt such technologies to Soviet conditions often required substantial efforts, greatly undervalued by those who wrote off the Soviet Union as no more than a technology thief. But greater obstacles lay beyond, in trying to diffuse the new technology throughout the economy. In civilian industry, at this stage, the command system typically failed because of the powerful incentives it gave managers to resist disruptive change. Diffusion was not impossible but proceeded slowly and typically after long delays. Only in the defence sector was *raison d'état* strong enough to speed the process. The degree to which corn conforms to the established pattern is striking to this reader. Of course, others might find something different.

*Corn Crusade* is well researched (in a dozen archives) and well argued. It contributes substantially to the study of post-Stalin reforms. Perhaps the author gives the critique of totalitarianism more attention than is due. On one side, he is entirely correct that much of Soviet society and the countryside specifically remained 'undergoverned' (p. 86). On the other side, Soviet leaders from Khrushchev through Andropov continued to maintain that the party should decide everything. That they did not overcome all resistance is another matter.

If Khrushchev made corn into a moral project, its outcome depended on numbers. Numbers are not neglected in *Corn Crusade* in the sense that the author has provided many of them in the text. But they are scattered, hard to find, and harder still to compile across years or across regions. Several times, I regretted the lack of a few tables or charts to show me the areas sown to corn and harvested year by year, the corn yields and harvests, and the enduring contribution of corn to Soviet food production and consumption. The omission of such tables was a false economy.