The Post-Soviet Potemkin Village

Politics and Property Rights in the Black Earth

The Post-Soviet Potemkin Village addresses the question of why the introduction of private property rights sometimes results in poverty rather than development. Most analyses of institutional change emphasize the design of formal institutions, but this study of land privatization in the Russia–Ukraine borderlands shows instead how informal practices at the local level can drive distributive outcomes.

Amidst widely differing institutional environments and reform pathways, local officials in Russia and Ukraine pursued strategies that produced a record of reform, even as they worked behind the scenes to maintain the status quo. The end result in both countries was a facade of private ownership: a Potemkin village for the post-Soviet era. Far from creating new private property rights that would bring development to the rural heartland, privatization policy deprived former collective farm members of their few remaining rights and ushered in yet another era of monopoly control over land resources.

Jessica Allina-Pisano draws on her extensive primary research in the Black Earth region conducted over a period of nine years to reach this surprising conclusion and uses extensive evidence from interviews, participant observation research, and documentary sources.

Jessica Allina-Pisano is an Associate Professor in the School of Political Studies at the University of Ottawa and an Associate of the Harvard University Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. She received her Ph.D. in political science from Yale University.

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This project was born fifteen years ago at a small kitchen table in a five-story Soviet apartment bloc, after a weekend hauling sacks of potatoes from a garden plot near Novgorod overland by foot, truck bed, and fourth-class train to St. Petersburg. Although neither the Kirsanov family nor I realized it at the time, my conversations with them in 1991, and their subsequent willingness to share their space and their lives with me during the following, difficult year, started me down this path, and I thank them for it.

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Note on Transliteration

In footnotes and in the text, I have largely used the Library of Congress system of transliteration for Russian and Ukrainian words. For reader comfort, I have abbreviated some transliterations of proper names in the text: Moskovsky rather than Moskovskii. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Note on Sources and Methodology

To avoid repetition and to allow the reader readily to identify geographical locations, I have used the following abbreviations in the notes: unless otherwise specified, "Voronezh" and "Kharkiv" refer to the regions, rather than the cities.

Abbreviations of District Names in Footnotes

Voronezh Region, Russian Federation		**Kharkiv Region, Ukraine**	
AV	Anninskii district	BK	Bohodukhivs'kyi district
LV	Liskinskii district	CK	Chuhuivs'kyi district
PV	Pavlovskii district	DK	Derhachivs'kyi district
SV	Semilukskii district	KK	Krasnokuts'kyi district
VV	Verkhnekhavskii district (Khava, in text)	LK	Lozivs'kyi district
		MK	Kolomats'kyi district
		NK	Novovodolaz'kyi district
Lipetsk Region, Russian Federation		PK	Pecheniz'kyi district
DL	Dankovskii district	VK	Vovchans'kyi district
		XK	Kharkivs'kyi district
		ZK	Zolochivs'kyi district
		Zakarpats'ka Region, Ukraine	
		UZ	Uzhhorods'kyi district

In order to preserve the anonymity of my respondents, in no case do I identify specific villages or other rural settlements. Names that appear in the text, except where I quote press reports, are pseudonyms, as are the names of the Voronezh agricultural collective "Chayanovskoe" and other

collectives where I conducted interviews, the district in Kharkiv I have called "L'viv" district, and the names of private farmers. Interviews with state officials identify the offices or divisions of administration, but not the titles of my respondents. The latter choice required some compromise of analytical precision in describing the reconfiguration of state power in the Black Earth countryside, but any other approach would have revealed too much about the identity of my interlocutors.

Newspapers and Statistics

A variety of perspectives are represented in the newspapers used in this study. For about ten years following the Soviet collapse, district and regional newspapers in both Russia and Ukraine covered a range of responses to land reform. During the 1990s, with local budgets stretched to the breaking point, newspapers were a luxury, and public libraries suspended subscriptions for months or years. District and regional newspapers were therefore not readily accessible. I read them in public libraries when they were available, borrowed back issues from editorial offices, and salvaged bound issues from state offices that had no space to store them.

District newspapers were successor institutions to party publications and were often owned or managed by local governments. They covered both pro- and anti-Moscow and Kyiv positions, reflecting local governments' often ambivalent stance toward reform policy. For example, in Voronezh, the Liski paper ran a number of stories about attempts to reclaim land that had belonged to local families prior to collectivization. Despite the absence of legislation providing for restitution, the stories were sympathetic to the claimants, who consistently faced a wall of bureaucratic indifference. At the same time, the Liski press also ran stories by farm chairmen who were critical of land privatization, advocated for buying produce locally, and positioned themselves as protectors of rural interests.[1]

In addition to using state-published statistical data, this study uses unpublished numerical evidence. I gathered this evidence from regional and district state offices, village councils, and individual enterprises. Statistical data, like much of the other information I collected during two years of research, was not easy to obtain. I collected it in the context

[1] For example, Leonid Vybornov, "Zybkoe ravnovesie," *LI*, 13 January 1998, 2.

Abbreviations of Newspaper Titles in Footnotes

Russia		Ukraine	
AV	*Anninskie vesti* (Anna)	*DP*	*Dneprovskaia pravda* (Dnepropetrovsk)
KO	*Kommuna* (Voronezh)	*DU*	*Delovaia Ukraina*
KR	*Krest'ianskaia Rossiia*	*KP*	*Kyiv Post* (Kyiv)
KV	*Krest'ianskie vedomosti*	*NZ*	*Novyny Zakarpattia* (Zakarpattia)
LI	*Liskinskie izvestiia* (Liski 1991–)	*SK*	*Slobid'skyi krai* (Kharkiv)
LZ	*Leninskoe znamia* (Liski–1991)	*TT*	*Trybuna trudiashchykh* (Kharkiv district)
MP	*Maiak Pridon'ia* (Pavlovsk)	*UK*	*Uriadovyi kur'er*
NG	*Novaia gazeta*	*ZN*	*Zerkalo nedeli*
RV	*Raionnyi vestnik* (Khava)	*ZoP*	*Zoria Poltavshchyny* (Poltava)
SZ	*Semilukskaia zhizn'* (Semiluki)	*ZaP*	*Zaporiz'ka pravda* (Zaporizhzhia)
VR	*Verkhnekhavskie rubezhi* (Khava)	*ZH*	*Zhytomyrshchyna* (Zhytomyr)

of ongoing relationships built over a period of months or years. This often required weeks of visiting state functionaries in their offices, exchanging – in an unacknowledged quid pro quo – stories about life in America for a page of economic data. In some cases, my initial visits were made possible only by a letter of introduction or telephone call from a high-ranking member of the national government. Much of the data I was able to collect was made available to me only after six or more months of ethnographic research. In district offices and on individual collective farms, I copied statistical material by hand, as photocopiers often were not available. In many instances, information ostensibly in the public domain was simply off-limits. For example, my attempts to review the public records of court cases involving private farmers – many of whom had to sue to receive physical access to land to which they held formal title – were consistently thwarted. In Kharkiv, I asked a senior faculty member at the National Law Academy to inquire about these records at the office of her acquaintance, the chief prosecutor for the region. The answer to her inquiry was a flat refusal to grant access to these "public" records.

Interviews and Ethnographic Research Techniques

A thorough discussion of the nuances of conducting interviews and ethnographic research in the post-Soviet countryside would require another complete book. I have noted a few points in order to explain how the evidence I have presented in this book was produced.

Researching a book about land privatization required that I learn a great deal about Black Earth agriculture. Over time, as I accumulated knowledge about the nuances of sugar beet seeding, the differences between tractors produced in Kharkiv and those manufactured in Minsk, and how to manage canning vegetables using a hot plate and a bathtub, my interlocutors were more forthcoming in conversation. The sequence of my research thus shaped the type and quality of the evidence I was able to collect. I conducted my research in Russia before I began my research in Ukraine, returning once again to Voronezh near the end of my field research in Kharkiv. The interviews I conducted then proved to be among the most fruitful of my time in the Black Earth. Additionally, my field sites for extended ethnographic research were qualitatively different on each side of the border, with a farm site in Russia and a state office and a farmers' organization in Ukraine. I have cited evidence from that research in the text as field notes or oral testimony (using the abbreviation "OT"), which refers to statements made to me or in my presence outside the context of interviews.

The accidental fact that I physically resemble people in the Black Earth, combined with hard-won language skills and cultural knowledge cultivated over a period of seventeen years, helped me blend in and acquire not only "outsider" but also "insider" perspectives in research. Those "insider" perspectives were not unproblematic, however. My more or less successful efforts to acquire local accents in Voronezh and Kharkiv, after first having been trained in literary Russian and Ukrainian, meant that I often was called upon to provide an explanation of my identity. Most people began by asking how long I had been living in the United States; this assumption placed me in the socially and politically dubious category of, as several people put it to me, "former Russian." Others used different cues to decide "who stood behind me" and what I was really after: Soviet-trained ethnographers work in teams, rather than singly, and there was no recent tradition of foreigners poking around asking questions for any reason other than matters of state. This meant that most rural people approached me with a measure of suspicion.

On more occasions than I could count, my interlocutors, drawing upon decades of experience of state surveillance, articulated the belief that I was collecting information for a government or agricultural firm. Another respondent remarked that I couldn't be a foreigner because I drove a small Russian vehicle. An Åmerican, after all, "would drive something fancier."

While a few private farmers and local state officials whom I interviewed had visited the United States on Department of Agriculture exchange programs, the majority of my interlocutors had never before met an American or other foreigner from the "far abroad." In some cases, this meant that the scripts people drew upon in interview and conversational narratives were everyday scripts, familiar to me from years of previous social interaction with people in and from Russia and Ukraine, rather than, necessarily, practiced liturgies of "what we tell the foreigners." In the course of my research, I came to conclude that the most important aspect of my outsider status was my urban identity and educational level, rather than my foreignness as such. The fact that my grandparents had been farmers helped bridge the divide somewhat, and on some occasions I was privy to village gossip and deprecation about city folk who summered in the countryside – even as I was the subject of it on other occasions.

Most interviews took place wherever my interlocutors happened to be working. On a few occasions, they occurred in respondents' homes. Some were individual interviews, while others were structured conversations that included small groups of people who knew each other. The latter tended to be especially revealing, as they often included both joking and heated arguments. I selected some of my interlocutors randomly, speaking with whomever agreed to speak with me. There are multiple selection biases implicit in this or any other approach: this method favored people who either had free time or were engaged in tasks for which my presence would not be a distraction. Thus, it was easier to find pensioners willing to speak with me than people of my own age, who were busy with farm and household labor. A few people with a specific complaint against a farm director or state official sought me out for conversation in places I frequented, sometimes requesting that I bring their story to an international audience. On some occasions, a member of officialdom would introduce me to a farm director or other local leader, who then spoke with me or directed me to others. Still other interviews came about as people whom I met in the course of research introduced me to their acquaintances. The resulting narratives tended to vary primarily according

to who was present when the interview or conversation took place, rather than according to who made the introduction.

Interviews tended to last about an hour and a half, though they ranged from twenty minutes to five hours. I spoke with some people only once, while in other cases I interviewed people I saw regularly over the course of a year or more. A small number of rural people have been longer-term interlocutors, with conversations spanning seven years or more.

The mechanics of note-taking and recording posed a significant challenge. As the chairman of Chayanovskoe put it to me, "people here have respect for the written word" because text written about them, in the hands of the authorities, had the power to ruin their lives. Most people refused to speak in the presence of a tape recorder or other recording device, and some even asked that I put down my pen. Higher-status people generally were more willing to be recorded; for this reason, longer passages in the text tend to come from private farmers or farm directors. In cases where I could use neither notebook nor tape recorder, I wrote up my notes immediately after the conversation. Because of most people's wish to speak off the record, I have avoided quoting unpublished direct statements of lower-level employees in the text. Instead, I used those interviews and conversations to help me interpret the statements of local officials, farm directors, and other more powerful figures in the Black Earth countryside.

My research also included an ill-fated survey, with a very small sample size including only a few respondents. The reason for this is that the directors of collectives whom I approached would not allow survey questions to be asked of their workers. Survey questions were concrete, straightforward, and not explicitly political – for example: "What is the size of your land share?" and "Did you receive a land share certificate?" One farm director "categorically objected" because he did not want members of his collective to "get any ideas." It should be noted that when the Ukrainian or Russian governments or international lending institutions conducted surveys, directors were compelled to allow participation and were in a position to instruct some employees as to "correct" responses.

In the text, I have emphasized what my interlocutors said they thought they were doing. Their statements are valuable not because they necessarily bear any intrinsic truth (social scientists are not yet in the business of measuring sincerity) but because of what they reveal about the

expectations of people in rural communities and provincial governments. In using this evidence, I have, however, compared their statements with what I have come to learn about the practice of agriculture in the region and the incentives people faced both in their professional capacities and as members of rural and provincial communities.

Glossary

Terms are given only in the language(s) in which they appear in the body of the text. For words associated primarily with the Soviet period, only the Russian terms appear: thus, *kolkhoz* (Russian), but not *kolhosp* (Ukrainian).

AKKOR	Association of Private Family Farmers and Agricultural Cooperatives of Russia
blat	A non-monetary exchange mechanism based on personal favors
chastnik	Private owner – here, a farm head
chudak	An eccentric
dacha	Summer cottage, often modest
gostorg	State trade office under communism
hospodar	Owner, master (Ukrainian)
iz''iatie	Seizure (here, of land)
khoziain	Owner, master (Russian)
kolkhoz	Collective farm
kolkhoznik	Member of a collective farm
kottedzh	Luxury home, often in the countryside (from English, "cottage")
krest'ianskoe (fermerskoe) khoziaistvo	Private farm (Russian)

kulak	Rich peasant (*lit.* fist), persecuted under Stalin in the 1930s
mitingovshchina	Rule by demonstrations
naturoplata	In-kind payment
oblast'	Administrative region of Russia or Ukraine
pai (also *dolia*)	A share in land or non-land farm assets
prodnalog	In-kind tax
razbazarivanie	Squandering, often by selling off
selians'ke (fermers'ke) hospodarstvo	Private farm (Ukrainian)
sotka	A unit of area: one-hundredth of a hectare (1 hectare = 2.47 acres), or 100 square meters
sovkhoz	State farm
tiapka	Garden hoe suitable for cutting plant roots

MAP 1. Two regions of the Black Earth, Voronezh and Kharkiv *oblasti*, 1991–present. Copyright © 2006, Harvard University Map Collection/Scott Walker. Reprinted with permission.

MAP 2. Voronezh *oblast'* in the twenty-first century. Copyright © 2006, Harvard University Map Collection/Scott Walker. Reprinted with permission.

MAP 3. Kharkiv *oblast'* in the twenty-first century. Copyright © 2006, Harvard University Map Collection/Scott Walker. Reprinted with permission.

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