

*Beneš, Jakub S.: The Last Peasant War. Violence and Revolution in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe.*¹

Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 2025, 383 pp., ISBN 978069121253.

Before going into detail, let us state that the book reviewed here is highly recommended. Jakub Beneš is an American historian of Czech origin who currently teaches at University College London. He has contributed significantly to the study of social democracy in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and rural conflicts in Central Europe. In this book, he takes the reader on a journey from the Great War to the

¹ This review was originally published in Spanish in *Historia Agraria* 95 (August 2025) 252-256, DOI: 10.26882/histagrar.096e08r. We thank the editors of the journal for permission to reprint the English translation.

establishment of communism, through the arduous consolidation of the states that emerged from the peace treaties, the interwar crisis, the rise of authoritarianism, the Second World War, and the resistance. These very broad topics are addressed within an enormous spatial framework, focusing on the former Habsburg domains but with frequent references to the Balkans as a whole and the territories of the Tsarist Empire, later the Soviet Union. These topics are developed along the guiding thread of the *green cadres*, which were irregular, peasant-based formations that emerged in many regions during the tumultuous transition between the formal end of hostilities in 1918 and the establishment of the new states. Traditionally, historiography has considered these movements to be mere episodes of local impact, lacking greater significance or aspirations, in line with the somewhat derogatory term “primitive rebels” coined by Eric Hobsbawm (1959). Under the heading of a genuine “rural revolution” (p. 2), Beneš provides, for the first time, a coherent overall interpretation, which begins by grouping these revolts and incidents following the fall of the Austro-Hungarian, German, and Russian empires. His thesis is that, underlying the apparent chaos and contradictions, a common trend can be detected, aimed at a complete restructuring of rural society by redistributing noble property, reducing the influence of intermediaries, promoting cooperativism, and implementing forms of local democracy.

The appeal of this work lies not only in its broad territorial scope but also in its attention to detail and its ability to combine large-scale processes with local examples. Extreme generalisations and misleading linear explanations are avoided by capturing the nuances and exceptions inherent in the complex heterogeneity of on-site realities. With his admirable use of sources and publications of the time, Beneš stimulates the reader’s empathy with the subjects of study. By focusing our attention on the life story of a deserter from a random village or on a violent incident in a remote corner of Slovenia or Polish Galicia, we can put ourselves in the protagonists’ shoes. Despite the complexity of the topics covered and the barrage of data, dates, and places, the author maintains a lively and entertaining tone, which is another merit of this remarkable book.

The starting point is obviously World War I, which led to an intensification of (mutual) hostility towards cities throughout Central and Eastern Europe and the discrediting of empires due to their incompetence in managing hostilities, the imbalances of the war economy (and its counterpart, the black market), and the sacrifices demanded from the peasantry without any apparent compensation. Unrest was manifested in the gradual resistance not only to food requisitions but also to measures against highly symbolic values, such as the melting down of bells, which affected the identity of local communities. The symptoms of growing unrest towards the authorities accumulated and eventually exploded with the defeat of the Central Powers, and the redefinition of the European political landscape allowed its expansion without control. While the impact of the bloodshed of 1914-1918 on people’s mindsets is well known through great names in literature such as Stefan Zweig and Ernst Jünger, Beneš draws on lesser-known authors who were in tune with the feelings of broad sections of the population, such as the Croatian Miroslav Krleža and the Slovak Milo Urban.

The *green cadres* were generally small groups of fugitives and deserters who operated in wooded and mountainous areas far from the front, relying on the complicity of the inhabitants of nearby towns for supplies and information. Although they were scattered in numerous regions, they were particularly strong among the southern Slavs, with the highest incidence in Croatia, whereas in Hungary and Bohemia their impact was less noticeable. Sociologically, their members were mostly small farmers, rarely day labourers or prosperous farmers. Their proliferation was a manifestation of the growing disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian state, although, of course, they didn't come to the extremes of post-revolutionary Russia. Particularly, the return of war prisoners, radicalised during their captivity in the East, was one of the factors that fuelled this phenomenon. During the last year of the war, the gendarmerie was overwhelmed. The complicity of the civilian population, and even many local authorities, further tied the hands of the Habsburg state in its agonising struggle for survival. Beyond evading their military duties, the green cadres engaged in various actions, including preventing the requisition of livestock and crops, intimidating officials and intermediaries, and distributing large estates or former communal lands whenever the state's weakness made it possible. Their agenda was varied, even including considerable doses of anti-Semitism. But what predominated was peasant radicalism and the defence of a moral economy perceived as having been destroyed during the war, hence the acts of revenge against those who were believed to have enriched themselves abusively by speculating during the war.

The actions of the green cadres were invariably misinterpreted, and so were their memories afterwards. Initially, the authorities of the Habsburg Empire believed them to be motivated primarily by nationalist and pro-Bolshevik sentiments, when in fact their objectives were fundamentally social. Once the political map had been blown up in 1918, the new states incorporated them into their official discourse as fighters for oppressed nations, even though their opposition to Vienna/Budapest stemmed from other causes. This, of course, does not mean that the nationalist factor was absent. In fact, the successor states had to make an effort to defuse the green cadres through a combination of repression and concessions, providing amnesties and integrating them into the armies.

The fourth chapter is devoted to an analysis of various short-lived 'peasant republics' that emerged between 1918 and 1919; these, with all due caution, are reminiscent of those in the areas controlled by the partisans in northern Italy at the end of World War II. They often echoed a distorted, reinterpreted version of concepts such as 'republic' or 'self-determination' that were circulating at another level in the halls of Versailles or in the newspapers. The ritual usually began with the expulsion of local officials, the convening of a popular assembly, the formation of a council or committee, the confiscation of large estates, and the formation of some sort of defensive militia, for which, amidst the post-war chaos, there was no shortage of either weapons or men familiar with their use.

The various manifestations of rural violence during the final year of the war and throughout the transition to the consolidation of the new states extended beyond the actions of these green cadres, whose boundaries were sometimes blurred. These could take the form of looting, assaults, collective punishments, intimidation of the

authorities, and a whole range of actions analysed by the author, almost with the mastery of an anthropologist, depicting their communal elements, their carnival-like trait, the reappearance of rituals of violence dating back many centuries, or the frequent anti-Semitism. In the description of mass raids on shops in which the attackers hand coins to the terrified shopkeepers for the price they deem fair for the goods before snatching them away, one feels as though reading pages mistakenly misplaced by E.P. Thompson. Similarly, the novelistic life stories of certain 'social bandits' (chapter six) make for a highly enjoyable read, whilst also serving as a warning of how risky it is for an academic to assign a categorical definition or label to individuals who could be successively or simultaneously deserters, criminals, heroes, and traitors, depending on the observer's point of view.

Beneš extends his analysis beyond the point at which the new states, for better or worse, established themselves within their disputed borders. If the rural violence of 1917-1920—to narrow it down chronologically—is of far greater significance than historiography has so far acknowledged, this is due to its medium- and long-term repercussions. To begin with, Beneš argues that the agrarian reforms implemented with varying degrees of ambition in this part of Europe were motivated, in large part, by a desire to prevent the recurrence of similar events. Secondly, many of these aspirations were channelled through the agrarian parties, which reached their maximum splendour in the interwar period. The desire for renewal that swept through rural Central and Eastern Europe also fuelled a whole series of associative initiatives, ranging from the Federation of Slavic Rural Youth to the people's schools, which, unlike the agrarian parties, were able to survive the authoritarian wave of the 1930s. Throughout all this, lines of continuity in people, settings, and procedures with the unrest of the immediate post-war period can be found, just as they can be traced, in part, somewhat later in the resistance to German occupation (and, in the case of Yugoslavia, to Italian occupation). The Polish peasant battalions constituted the extreme case.

The imposition of communist regimes and the collectivisation of land completely altered the rules of the game. The last major armed uprising took place in Bosnia in 1950 against collectivisation (and the abusive pressures and quotas used to force those reluctant to comply). The official version of Tito's government attributed this to agitation by fascist elements, but, in reality, the reasons for the discontent were far more practical. Proof of this is the state's decision to reduce the compulsory delivery quotas and the 1950 decree establishing that joining the kolkhozes would be voluntary. Once again, the potential for conflict within rural communities demonstrated their ability to influence the agenda of major decisions.

The book concludes with an epilogue reflecting on the memory of post-war rural violence and the green cadres, a memory already distorted at the time by the new states emerging from the peace treaties, which needed to bolster their legitimacy. Subsequently, the communist regimes consigned them to oblivion or denigrated them, except for those episodes and figures that contained elements allowing them to be assimilated into class-based narratives. Today, they are commemorated, but once again in a nationalist vein and purging their less presentable aspects. Reality is always more complex than self-serving narratives. A deep understanding of this 'last

peasant war' referred to in the title must be approached from its own internal logic, as Jakub Beneš has done in this magnificent work.

Santiago de Compostela

Miguel Cabo

Translated from Spanish by Ruth Pappenheim