
Peasant War, Violence and Revolution

Jakub Beneš

in conversation with Samuel Foster and Francis King

Jakub S. Beneš is the author of *The Last Peasant War: Violence and Revolution in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (2025), a history of the largely forgotten peasant revolution that swept Central and Eastern Europe after the First World War. This is an edited transcript of a discussion with Samuel Foster and Francis King held in October 2025.

FK: The upheavals in Eastern Europe after the end of the First World War are often considered through the lens of national liberation or of social revolution. But in your book you look at them in terms of ‘peasant war’. What would you say are the main insights that we can gain from taking this perspective?

JB: I would say it is about recovering the experience of the largest demographic group at this time in much of Europe from what E. P. Thompson referred to as the enormous condescension of posterity. Peasants mostly didn’t understand the upheavals of 1917 to 1921 through the lens of socialist revolution or national liberation. They had their own perspective on these events and on their own involvement in them, which I thought needed to be recovered. The more I looked at what was happening in the countryside at this time, through oblique or suggestive references in isolated studies and archival sources, the more I realised there had been something quite big happening that hadn’t really been talked about enough. It had been studied in the Russian case, although there’s still more work to be done. But regarding East-Central Europe, there was not much about what peasants had been doing, what they experienced. So I was inspired to look more closely, and I think what was happening can be described as a social, though not a socialist, revolution. For the peasants, who made up most of the people in East-Central and Eastern Europe, this revolution was about agricultural land, and they had very egalitarian ideas about how land should be redistributed and shared. But these were not *per se* socialist ideas. The peasants were not interested in collective ownership, although they were interested in cooperative arrangements for sharing and pooling of technology and resources for certain things like production, marketing and so on. So cooperativism was already in the air in the countryside, but collective ownership was always something that they that peasants regarded with deep suspicion. So the first thing is to recover the experience of this enormous group of people.

Another thing I think this peasant-war concept can help us understand is how the mobilisation of the peasantry influenced other developments, such as

the kind of political centralism in some of the European 'successor states', like Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, which ended up undermining them at the end of the interwar period. Peasant violence was also one of the reasons why the Entente imposed obligations on the successor states in East Central Europe to protect their minorities, which in some respects alienated these states early on from their western sponsors. I'm thinking particularly of the 'minority treaty' imposed on Poland – although the episodes of violence by soldiers against Jews were the most notorious, violence by peasants also certainly played a part.

Finally, 'peasant war' can help us understand that revolution can be something that people with mostly conservative instincts may pursue to defend their way of life. That's not an original idea – Eric Wolf made the same point in his *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, first published in 1969. It is easy to call these peasant actors naive and unrealistic, but I don't think that's right. If you look at the agrarian politics that emerges at the end of the First World War, these peasant mobilisations are not simply about turning back the clock. Although they might occasionally invoke lost privileges like peasant revolts often did in the medieval and early modern period, there is also a blueprint for something new.

SF: Thanks Jakub. As you say, much has been written on the role of the peasantry as a revolutionary actor in Imperial Russia before 1914, for example in the 1905 revolution. But what about the Habsburg monarchy under Franz Josef? Did the conditions of the peasants in pre-war Austria-Hungary provide a similar basis for unrest, or were these rural uprisings mainly just another manifestation of the collapse of the Imperial state after the war?

JB: I think it's a bit of both. There were certainly deep grievances among the peasantry before the First World War. But what happened at the end of the war was quite specific, a product of the mobilisation of vast peasant masses into a large multi-ethnic conscript army that was then deployed at faraway fronts. At the end of the war, when they were either demobilised or had deserted, the peasants brought back with them the experience of the fronts, of using weapons and functioning as an army. So there was a level of militarism and violence in the peasant movements at the end of the First World War that had not been seen before. Even the great 1907 peasant revolt in Romania, where some peasant army veterans played a prominent role, was nowhere near as militarised as what happened at the end of the First World War.

That said, there were also longer-term, post-emancipation, grievances that made peasants predisposed to revolt after the war – loss of stability, exposure to the caprices of the capitalist market, indebtedness, things like that. The position in East-Central Europe was a bit different from that in Russia, in that in Russia communal forms of land ownership had continued, whereas since 1848 in East Central Europe land ownership had taken liberal, individualistic forms. But there were major grievances with that post-emancipation situation.

In the Habsburg monarchy, especially in the so-called Austrian half, there had been an incremental democratisation which meant that even the poorest peasants got to vote for the first time in 1897, and on equal terms from 1907. So peasants had already been brought into the political system. Peasant parties and organisations existed before the war, but emerged much bigger, stronger, and more motivated after it.

FK: Could you please say some more about how the experience of the war helped develop a peasant class consciousness, moving the peasantry from being a class in itself to be a class for itself, one with a sense of its own class interests?

JB: Yes, that the peasants became a class for themselves is good way of putting it, and it is one of the arguments of my book. Peasant class consciousness waxed and waned over the centuries, but during the First World War it crystallised in a really powerful way. A key factor was the peasants' growing sense of opposition between themselves and these dynastic empires, which for generations they had looked upon as 'their own' in some way. You know, the old truism that the peasants imagined that the good king or emperor was on their side, and it was just the local officials or the nobility who spoiled things. But this fondness for the dynasty and its state was eroded over the course of the war. I argue that a big factor in that erosion was the state's intrusion into the rural economy to extract agricultural products by force, in order to feed the armies, to feed the cities. Peasants increasingly felt victimised by the state, and began to see themselves as a category separate from the state, the dynasty, and the Emperor. The cities also began to appear as a rival or even as an enemy, even though many peasants had relatives, friends or seasonal jobs in cities.

FK: So during the war the state and the city came to be perceived as the main exploiters of the peasantry, whereas previously the main direct exploiters had been the large landowners, the rural rich?

JB: I think that's right. Of course, there were all sorts of local variations. Some peasants got rich during the war because they were well connected to urban markets and were able to sell at a good profit. But I found that most of the peasant smallholders were not in that position, and felt they were being exploited, really robbed by a government which was only interested in feeding the cities. Of course, this was an industrial war, and the cities were the sites of industry, especially the munitions industry. Munitions workers did see their wages and rations increase during the war, although other workers did not.

SF: A central focus of your book is on the 'green cadres', the peasant paramilitary groups consisting largely of war veterans, which emerged towards the end of the war. Although, as you show, they were disparate and localised, should we also see them as indicative of wider international trends, particularly from 1917

onwards? How significant, for instance, were the veterans who had served on the Eastern Front, or had even been POWs during the Russian Revolution?

JB: Very significant, I think. The green cadres caught my interest early on, and the more I looked, the more interesting and intriguing they became. They played quite an important part in the breakdown of imperial authority in East Central Europe, and I kept finding them and veterans of this loose movement in all sorts of places from 1918 all the way through the Second World War. The experience of having been mobilised into these multi-national, multi-ethnic armies and sent to fight in far-flung places fostered a sense of shared fate among the peasant conscripts. It can certainly help explain why they all called themselves 'green cadres' in all these disparate localities. They all shared the same dissatisfaction with the army, which in the Austro-Hungarian case was severely under-provisioned by 1917. And as for those soldiers who had been POWs in Russia, many of them had witnessed the February and October revolutions firsthand and had often liked what they saw. Then they started coming back home, a trickle at first, becoming a deluge in the first half of 1918. And they did not like what they saw back home, and thought that things in Russia had been going pretty well during the revolution. And they brought a kind of radicalism back with them.

As for international trends, we might surmise that their colour-coding, 'green cadres', was partly inspired by the example of the 'Red Guards', these local Bolshevik militias, they had seen in Russia. But significantly they had their own colour, which reflects their separate identity and agenda. There were also international patterns of communication and transportation at this time – everything travelled along railways, which served both as vectors of information and of revolution. The movement developed and spread along railway routes and, like in the Russian Civil War, the green cadres and other armies fought for control of them.

So we see green cadres appearing in Austria-Hungary from early 1918, and then especially by 1919 we see big armies of peasant deserters in the Russian Civil War, who also get dubbed 'green armies', particularly by outsiders. But the returning POWs were more important as a factor in Austria-Hungary than in the Russian Revolution.

FK: What was the role of intellectuals in the leadership of the peasant movement in the former Habsburg Empire? In Russia, the Party of Socialist Revolutionaries was very much created and dominated by the intelligentsia, both nationally and locally, although in so far as they articulated peasant demands, they could gain peasant support. Was the position in Austria Hungary similar, or did their organisations come more directly from below, from the class itself?

JB: Well, when the countryside collapses into anarchy or becomes anarchic during the imperial collapse, it's difficult to discern the role of any intellectuals. This

was probably the case in Russia as well for much of 1917. I'm not sure whether many SR party functionaries were involved in, say, occupying estate land or looting manor houses. But yes, peasantist parties in East-Central Europe do quickly become an important presence on the ground in the new successor states, and in some places that certainly overlaps with the revolutionary period. In other places the peasant parties only assert or reassert their authority once things have settled down and the state again has regained its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence over most of its territory.

However, in Croatia, for example, there was definitely an overlap between the organisation of Stjepan Radić's Croatian Peasant Party on the ground and peasant radicalism, some of it violent. In September 1920 there was this revolt against livestock branding in central Croatia. Although Radić himself was in jail at that time and was preaching non-violence, many of the revolt's leaders were local Peasant Party functionaries. They could be considered local 'organic intellectuals', in the Gramscian sense.

FK: In your book you mention how the Czech nationalists tried to harness the peasant movement to their own national aspirations, not entirely successfully. Later on, you discuss how some peasant movements were co-opted by or evolved towards communist, fascist and various other currents. What can we say about the ways other political movements in East-Central Europe tried to ally with, use, or fight these peasant movements?

JB: Well, in the era of nationalism, the peasantry are gold, right? They're the paragon of national virtue, the truest embodiment of 'the nation', at least from the perspective of nationalist intellectuals. Some of them, in the more literate areas like the Czech lands, realised this and tried to exploit it for their own ends. In the 'Slovácko Brigade', which I discuss in chapter five, the peasantry in that area [south-east Moravia] already had a sense of 'the nation' and recognised its value. But they had their own eccentric and heterodox understanding of what the nation is. They wanted it to be decentralised, ruralised and kind of folklorised in a more genuine sense than the urban intellectuals and leaders in Prague were ready for.

So there was contest over the concept of the nation. Some of the peasant leaders, like Radić, played up the peasantry's national value, but then made very specific peasantist claims about what the peasants really wanted. On the other hand, everyone wanted to claim the peasants for their side, even if they didn't really want to do much for them, because the peasants were valuable symbolically and demographically. The peasantist parties wagered heavily on parliamentary politics and the stability of parliaments. So when there was a series of authoritarian coups across the region [later in the 1920s], the peasantist politicians did not have much of a response.

The peasants themselves were free agents politically. In some notable cases they were co-opted into movements of the extreme right. In some other regions,

there was a lot of interest among the peasants in communism and far left politics, although that tended to remain regionalised and limited to ethnic and national minorities.

The extreme right definitely sought to play up its attachment to the peasantry, and in some places they even adopted a peasantist programme, which contributed to their rising stock. There was a notable example in Hungary in the 1930s, the so-called Scythe Cross movement, which drew heavily on peasant radicals in the southeast of the country. But the biggest case was the 'Iron Guard' in Romania, which cultivated and got genuine mass peasant support. This was down to the local activism of young Iron Guard members in villages across Romania. They cultivated an image of latter-day Mendicant Friars, modest, ascetic, going among the people and helping them. In many places the peasants really took to them, and the Iron Guard was getting hundreds of thousands of votes in the late 1930s. And in Romania, at least while its founder and leader Corneliu Codreanu was alive, the Iron Guard did not need to make any concessions to the large landowner class. But in most cases far right and fascist movements just paid lip service to the peasantry, which did not generally win them lasting peasant support. The classic case here is Italy. Mussolini would talk about a sort of a rural nation of peasants, letting the fresh air of the countryside into the cities and all this, but at the end of the day he allied with the large landowners again.

By the 1930s most of the regimes in East-Central Europe were one flavour of authoritarian nationalism or another. And the peasants were absolutely critical for the nationalist imagination, at least symbolically. But this did not mean much in terms of actual results for the peasants. In economic policy these regimes were privileging industry and the cities. They were led mostly by urban lawyers, the core of their movements was white collar workers, and they saw urban modernity as a matter of national prestige and power too. And industry was key to maintaining the army and defence and things like that which peasantists were not that keen on. They thought industry and the government should be investing food processing plants, and things which would make it easier for peasants to market their stuff and provide some jobs.

SF: What can we say about the legacy of this peasantist movement today? Did anything even remain after the Cold War?

JB: I think that anti-urban populism can be seen as one legacy of these movements, and it's obviously very important in today's world. Of course, the peasant movements of the first half of the 20th century are not the only source for this, but they certainly are one source. Even in their more moderate forms, they always argued for the moral superiority of the countryside and the moral inferiority of the city which was inherently corrupt, exploitative, and sometimes dangerously foreign in terms of its ethnic makeup. Some of these tropes are very strong today in various kinds of populist movements. They draw their support

not just from the countryside, which is demographically negligible compared to what it was, but from provincial towns, down-at-heel post-industrial cities and anywhere that feels like it's outside of the Big City, the metropolis, the thriving hubs of global capitalism. But it's important to recognise, of course, that the peasantry as it existed back then is gone in Europe and the West today. The peasantry that still exists is in the global South.

FK: So if we were to draw up a balance sheet of peasantism, what would you say were its lasting achievements, in those parts of Europe where these movements were once strong?

JB: The three pillars of peasantism, the three core tenets, which have been identified in the work of Alex Toshkov, for example, and others, were: belief in some kind of representative democracy; belief in and work towards a kind of a co-operative economy; and the central idea of land reform, that the land should belong to those who work it. These principles changed the countryside and maybe by extension modern Europe for the better. I think these are still admirable goals and are still highly valued in Europe. It's certainly not the case that that everyone who votes for anti-urban populist parties wants some kind of fascism, or a return to the manorial economy or something like that. There is still democratic and hopeful political potential in the countryside that remains to be tapped.

Jakub S. Beneš, *The Last Peasant War: Violence and Revolution in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, Princeton UP, Princeton NJ, 2025; 400 pp.; ISBN 9780691212531, £35.00, hbk.