

Book Review: Beneš, Jakub S. *The Last Peasant War: Violence and Revolution in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*. Princeton University Press, 2025. ix + 383 pages. Hardcover.

The Last Peasant War: Violence and Revolution in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe is the latest study of Central and Eastern Europe by historian Jakub S. Beneš of University College London.

The Last Peasant War begins with deserters from the First World War who formed small and scattered groups of bandits, renegades, and politically minded cadres, dubbed “Greens” for the forests they used for refuge, in rural and Slavic areas of the doomed Habsburg monarchy (p.56). Beneš compares and contrasts their wartime actions and the political fortunes of peasant organizations and leaders in former Habsburg territories through the early Cold War.

Beneš’ main argument is that the First World War, wartime disruptions of international trade, and emergency Habsburg takeovers of manpower and farm products led to desertions and violence against the state by soldiers who came from rural communities. These conflicts emerged haphazardly but had similar antiwar goals, which inspires the author to label them a singular war by peasants as a social class. Greens helped end the war and gained a modicum of representation, autonomy, and property rights in Habsburg successor states but inevitably became embroiled in the Second World War and postwar Communist rule, though Yugoslavia and Poland managed to avoid Soviet-style collective farms (p.298). Taking stock of the twenty-first century, when small holders have essentially disappeared from Europe, the epilogue carefully broaches today’s conflicts between populist successors of Green deserters and elites who take their grievances as simple racism and xenophobia.

The Last Peasant War challenges both the materialist assumption that rural violence reflects structural economic changes, and the realist and popular association of conflict in Eastern Europe with ethnic and religious identities. Against such preconceptions the author

begins each chapter with an extended summary preview followed by organized and detailed narrative. Beneš does not include data tables or line graphs, and actual deserters from a century ago did not leave behind many first-hand accounts. He instead relies on publications and archives in several languages and well-coordinated use of maps, photographs, illustrations, literature, and museums.

Social scientists can gain much from *The Last Peasant War*, starting with the straightforward way that Beneš deals with legitimacy. The author argues very clearly that wartime emergency measures tested and ultimately destroyed the legitimacy of the Habsburg regime among peasants who, indeed, had wanted mainly to be left alone. As an historian, moreover, Beneš demonstrates the advantages of mining available sources for revealing facts and anecdotes regarding deserters and former prisoners of war, mutual hostility between city-based authorities and rural communities, the turmoil and possibilities of the interwar period, and charismatic leaders.

Qualitative researchers should appreciate how Beneš uses timeline and geography in early chapters as evidence for peasant autonomy. Many former prisoners of war carried news of the Bolshevik revolution back to Austria-Hungary and organized Red uprisings. Yet peasant rebellions emerged at different locations around Habsburg territories before news of Russia became widespread. The author also argues that Greens targeted Jewish persons as merchants, rather than an ethnic or religious group, and later offers a similar class-based argument for Muslim Greens in the Balkans during the Second World War. On balance, Beneš makes a convincing case that Greens took independent action during and after the war. A high point is chapter 7, which contrasts Marxist hostility to the rural poor since the nineteenth century with a real-world surge in peasant politics in the interwar period. At the same time, that chapter's

review of nineteenth century agrarian movements in Europe and the United States could have served as a prelude to the discussion of First World War rebellion in chapter 1.

Finally, social scientists might associate the study of rural violence with Cold War landmarks such as Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (1966), Eric Wolf's *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969), or James C. Scott's *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985). Beneš cites Moore and Wolf by name in the book's introduction, but he rebukes academics who treat peasants as obstacles to modernization, or who characterize their resistance as "weak" (p.2, 35, 79, 268). Nonetheless, the most telling epistemological difference between those landmarks and *Last Peasant War* is the realist identification of war, rather than changes in global economic structures, as the primary catalyst for peasant rebellion.

In conclusion, Beneš has created new knowledge about political violence in twentieth century Eastern Europe and provided an alternative view of rural politics. This makes it easy to recommend *Last Peasant War* to a broad range of social scientists.

Dr. John Linantud
Professor and Coordinator of Political Science
University of Houston Downtown, Texas