Rural Development and Land Use

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Baltic Pre-history

The First Settlers
People have inhabited the Baltic Sea watershed area for almost 100,000 years, but it was only after the melting of the inland ice during the last glacial period (ca 70,000 BC to ca 12,000 BC) that agriculture was introduced and permanent settlements were built. Traces of the oldest permanent human habitation in the southern part of the region date back to around 12,000 BC, while the first agricultural settlers moved in and significant agricultural production emerged around 4,000-3,500 BC. Starting with this period, agriculture has played a central role in the social, political and economic life of the region with the notable exception of its most northerly regions, where indigenous populations continue a semi-nomadic lifestyle up to this day. There are four major stages in the development of rural societies in the Baltic basin: 1) Early history, 2) Feudalism and medieval state formation, 3) Industrialisation, and 4) Modern rural societies.

Neolithic Times to Bronze Age
During pre-historic times, the geography of the region looked very different, as most of the region was covered with ice and water and the Baltic Sea formed an enclosed freshwater lake. As the ice drew back, during the late Palaeolithic period, reindeer-hunting camps started to appear at the edge of the ice. There was a little forest with occasional arctic white birch and rowan patches, but as the climate became warmer the area became covered by taiga, attracting wildlife and people. Archaeological, linguistic and genetic evidence suggests that the peoples arrived first from the south-west and north-east. These peoples lived nomadic lives and depended on hunting, fishing and collecting roots, herbs, berries, seeds and mushrooms.

During the 6th millennium BC, the climate was warm enough to cover southern parts of the region, with forests of temperate broadleaved trees breeding deer and moose and providing a source of survival for the group of tribes belonging to the Kongemose culture living in the area. They continued to develop fishing and seal hunting techniques they inherited from their predecessors. Culturally and socially, these tribes lived the same lifestyle as others in northern areas of the globe, including Northern Eurasia and America. Archaeological data suggest that these societies were patriarchal, but not as strict and gender discriminatory as they became in settler groups. Numerous imported objects found in the graves testify to connections with the European mainland.

The first settlements emerged in areas constituting today’s Denmark, Northern Germany, Poland and Southern Sweden. The process of settling first started with the establishment of fishing settlements near the water and then spread to include inland agricultural communities. These cultures included not only groups with advanced agricultural culture, but also those using primitive tools. Archaeological sources show that they built fortified settlements and started making copper tools, jewelry, and arms. The processes of settling and the advancement of agricultural technologies in the Baltic region also led to
the development of politically much more centralised and hierarchical social systems in villages. With the surplus production of food that was enabled by farming and animal husbandry, during the 4th millennium BC local socio-economic systems were slowly transformed into broader trading economies, and labour was diversified. The sedentary lifestyle and food surpluses also led to an increase in population density and much later, in the first millennium AD, to the first major urban settlements in the region.

Life in the Neolithic and Bronze age villages meant being constantly preoccupied with food procurement. At that time food preservation techniques were limited and households, which included extended family members, subsisted on growing domesticated plants and animals and on the collection of wild plant foods and hunting. The groups living along the coastline and inland in today’s Denmark learned to use domesticated dogs, goats, swine, and oxen. It is important to note that all the domesticated animals came from the Middle East and Asia with the exception of reindeer, which were domesticated by the Sami people. Animals lived in the same built structures as humans. During the Neolithic period people learned to milk goats and cows, and milk played an important part in rural economies. Milk was used as a protein source for drinking, but also as sour curd that resembled the present day cottage cheese. Since people did not keep hens, their diets did not include eggs. In addition to domesticated food sources, they also hunted deer, bison and wild boar. Cats were not domesticated, but mice and rats had not yet adapted themselves to live in human habitats.

The agricultural tools were wooden and weak, making it difficult to work the land. The early farmers practised slash-and-burn cultivation, which required them to move around often after the plots they had cultivated were exhausted of nutrients and allowed to be re-taken by brush. Using crude plows and stone sickles to cultivate grains, and with the development of milling techniques, their diets were enriched with wheat, barley, and millet. They stored their grain in pots and made it into heavy bread baked without yeast.

In these early times people dressed mostly in skins, but they also slowly acquired skills in handling textiles and started using woven fabrics made out of flax. Their fishing nets were also made of flax.

The Neolithic houses were very simple. Most of the dwellings at that time continued to be built using wood, bone, fur, leaves, grasses, and only later brick. Made of these materials, the huts had clay floors. There is no archaeological evidence of stools or tables or beds. In their households they used pots and woven baskets for keeping grains, dairy, and other foodstuff and often kept them hanging by the ropes from the ceiling. The children and young adults took the cows and goats out to graze, and brought them in at night.
The most common settlements in the region consisted of 20-30 relatively independent, self-sustaining households with approximately several hundred inhabitants. Collections of these settlements later led to the formation of more hierarchical social systems known as tribes. Villages, integrated units that were based on cultural bonds and economic interdependence, were not established until the Iron Age. The household was the centre of social organisation and agricultural production. Within the household, labour was distributed according to age and gender. It was arguably during this period that the division between the public and the private spheres was established, separating the feminine-domestic domain from the public life that involved males. However, Neolithic societies worshipped goddesses and were involved in cults celebrating female gods.

In these Neolithic societies there was little occupational specialisation, meaning that every household produced tools and procured food using their own resources and skills. Only later, with the improving technologies and increasing agricultural surplus, did specialisations such as pottery making or metalwork start to take shape. Simultaneously, complex systems of proprietorship and inheritance emerged, laying the foundations for more integrated systems of exchange and trading, as well as the emergence of slavery.

It should be noted that the so-called Neolithisation of the region was neither linear nor homogeneous. For instance, the people of contemporary Sweden’s northern parts retained an essentially Mesolithic lifestyle into the 1st millennium BC.

Furthermore, due to major population migrations during the Neolithic period, groups of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and vastly different lifestyles lived next to each other. For example, the proto-Sami groups continued to lead a nomadic lifestyle, while the groups that were descendants of Indo-European migrants settled down and practised agriculture.

**Iron Age**

In the eastern and south-eastern parts of the Baltic watershed, the processes of settling occurred somewhat later. While the first traces of human activity in the territory of today’s three Baltic States and Russia go back to around 10,000 BC, it was not until the 1st and 2nd Century AD that agriculture became the primary occupation and the key source of their food. At first, the land was cultivated collectively by clearing brush and forests. By the 5th Century, the Baltic, Slavic and Ugro-Finn tribes started using metal tools and draft animals, and the customs of inheritance were formed.

During the Iron Age, around 4th to the 1st Century BC, people in the south-western part of the region began extracting iron from the ore and peat-bogs. At that time the climate in the region became significantly cooler and wetter, limiting agriculture and leading to southward migrations and a significant decline in local cultures that lasted at least until 500 BC. Starting from the 2nd Century BC, the Roman Empire exerted its influence on local cultures and lifestyles, especially among the elite. While its borders encompassed only the most south-westerly parts of the Baltic basin, peoples living in this territory maintained active trade routes and relations with the Romans, as attested by finds of Roman coins and records showing that some of the Danish warrior aristocracy served in the Roman Army.

Through their interactions with the Roman Empire and in response to increasing competition for land and resources, the tribes living in the Baltic areas started forming more coherent and larger political entities that encompassed several tribes and that later emerged as mediaeval states.

Figure 7.2. Reenactment of iron age farmers tilling the land with a wooden ard (plow) in Lejre, Denmark. © Lejre experimental Centre.
Social Conditions During Early Middle Ages

The Vikings
Starting in the 5th Century and through 1050 AD, Norse cultures in the south-western regions of the Baltic watershed region lived through the Vendel and Viking periods that made them famous for long distance seafaring, trading, exploring, raiding and the colonisation of coastal areas of Europe, North Africa and even the Middle East and North America. These groups developed a complicated social structure including tribal, kinship and merit-based relations. While the majority of population in the Nordic region were involved in agriculture and local fishing, long-distance seafaring significantly affected the Baltic region and its societies through commercial and technological exchanges.

During the Vendel and Viking periods, rural settlements continued to grow in numbers and population density, with the wealth being increasingly concentrated in the hands of the most powerful families. These settlements also became integrated into large political unions that included vast territories. Instead of self-sufficient egalitarian households living as relatively independent units, the archaeological data reveal the emergence of hierarchical villages with magnificent buildings erected in the centre by the most prominent families and a number of huts built around the perimeter of the village and inhabited by poor farmers. During this period, the first military fortresses, court buildings and royal palaces were built by the noblemen.

In this period, four to five social classes could be identified in Baltic rural societies. The highest class consisted of the noblemen, who were born to the most prominent families such as ancestral kings and patriarchal chieftains. In the densely populated areas of the South and South-West Baltics, the tribal chief constituted an independent class from the kings, who were their superiors and to whom they paid their tribute. The royal-noblemen class was far removed from the rest of society and had a cross-regional culture of its own that it shared with West European aristocracies. The next class down consisted of powerful farmers or ‘middle class’, landowners who were preoccupied with building their wealth and political influence. The third class comprised former slaves and the poorest of the farmers who subsided on their small land plots and who were the primary source of hired labour in the village. At the bottom of the social structure were slaves, who performed the most difficult tasks and who built the wealth of the owner’s family and the village. Most of the slaves were acquired as war prisoners or bought from other villages. Not surprisingly, many slaves were of different ethnic or cultural background. The descendants of slaves were also born into slavery and they could only be freed by their owners. In addition to the slaves who were acquired through warfare, free farmers too could fall in their social standing and be enslaved if they failed to repay their debt or as punishment for a crime.

Free Farmers
The households of free farmers remained relatively large, 20-30 individuals. While the data suggest that Baltic societies were organised around patriarchy, scholars argue that this was not as clearly pronounced in terms of economic exploitation, limited decision-making and exclusive property laws as in the rest of Western Europe. Noble women were allowed to manage their property and make economic decisions. Unlike in Western Europe, noble women were buried in graves as rich and well decorated as those of their male counterparts.

The most powerful households in the village – such as free farmers (about 10-20% of rural population) and chieftains (about 2-5% of rural population) – owned up to 30 slaves and also hired help, but they were also part of the commons and shared pastures with the rest of the village community. Considering that the most valued property at the time was land, they possessed the best land and the most advanced tools to work it. They participated in the local and global markets that were enabled through Viking explorations, and they paid in silver and gold coins. Despite clear boundaries among social classes, upward mobility was possible and it was achieved through marriage. In some cases the position of the most prominent leader of the village was not inherited, and the chieftain had to prove himself in order to be elected and establish legitimacy among the village community. In the case of free farmers, land was owned by all the members of the family including sons and unmarried daughters. A dowry was given to daughters upon their marriage and most of it was paid in gold, not land.
During the Viking period, homes became larger and building techniques improved. Instead of clay and mortar, the homes of the free farmers were built using wood and bricks. In addition, the animals were moved away from human homes into sheds. Herds of livestock increased to 80-100 animals, especially in the territories of contemporary Denmark and Southern Sweden. The advancement of agricultural technology allowed farmers to switch from the Celtic land use system that was implemented in 200-300 AD to an infield-outfield system. Infields consisted of enclosed meadows and cultivated lands, while the outer parts of land, or outfields, were used as pastures. Stone walls separated the domains and allowed better control over livestock. The village during this period consisted of 5-7 settlements covering about 5 square kilometres.

The diet of the rural population also improved due to the advancement of food preservation techniques including drying, smoking, curing and fermenting, as well as freezing in the northernmost areas. Milk continued to be the most important component in the local diet, while cattle and pigs were the most important livestock. Most farms also had sheep which not only provided the households with milk, but also with wool used for clothing and even sails. With the development of trading routes, oxen became a valuable commodity in the south of contemporary Denmark. Similarly, groups living along the coast of contemporary Sweden sold herring, while the Baltic tribes traded amber, resin, wax, honey, furs and wood.

The Role of Women
By the end of the Iron Age, labour and life in the village were organised around gender relations. During the early Middle Ages, women were increasingly pushed into the domestic sphere and were often deprived of the right to own land or property. While the law statutes of the Duchy of Lithuania allowed elite women to inherit and manage property, women from lower social strata did not have any such rights. The average age of marriage for women in the 13th and 14th Century was 16 and they bore an average of 7-8 children. It was not uncommon for the children to be born out of wedlock before church marriage until well into the 17th Century and the only form of contraception used in villages was wet-nursing lasting up to 4-5 years. Starting the 15th Century, a major shift took place in Baltic families as the child-bearing age increased and the age difference between husband and wife started to decrease. By the 17th Century the average age at marriage for women in Denmark’s rural areas reached 28 years and for men it was 31 years, while women had 4-5 children in their lives. This suggests that women in villages entered marriage as
The Rural Society

more mature individuals and as a result, they had more legitimacy and power in making strategic decisions compared with their predecessors in the Middle Ages.

Households of free farmers in the Middle Ages consisted of family members and slaves. As slaves were gradually replaced by hired servants and their numbers in the household decreased and the childbirth rate started to drop, the average rural household in western parts of the region consisted of only 6-8 persons. The size of household for the poor farmers and freed serfs was even smaller, about 4 people. This was because there were rarely any relatives or older generation living together with the family and young children were sent out to work on the estates.

Middle Ages

State Formation and Christianisation

It was during the early mediaeval period that the groups of tribes living in the Baltic Sea region formed the first unified states with established and coherent polities. While the boundaries of these early political units changed significantly in the course of the next millennium, the states in the region maintained their cultural and political identity throughout the Middle Ages and into the early Modern era. These political units approximately corresponded to the Modern countries of Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Poland, Prussia, Lithuania-Belarus, Russia and the Czech Republic. For the rural populations, the establishment of unified political units brought new systems of social and political control, as well as increased conflicts over the use of land and natural resources. With the development of the distinct political states, rural societies in the Baltic region continued to diversify and develop distinct cultural and social systems. The foundation of the hierarchical administrative systems in the early Middle Ages unmade the relatively homogeneous Iron Age cultures of Northern Europe and led to the emergence of strong place-based identities and idiosyncratic cultures.

In addition to the development of new political and administrative unions that connected villages into integrated administrative networks and spun the web of supervision and control over them, the Middle Ages also brought Christianity into the region, fundamentally transforming local belief systems, world views, rituals, lifestyles, diets and architecture. Christianisation started with the baptism of the Danish king Harold Bluetooth in the 960s and swept through the region, reaching the Grand Duchy of Lithuania first in 1250 and then in 1385 when the country was irreversibly Christianised. This new religion had many advantages for the kings, as it brought support from the Holy Roman Empire and political legitimacy in the eyes of other European powers. It also allowed the king to dismiss many of his opponents who adhered to the old mythology. The Church brought a stable administration that rulers could use to exercise some control over their subjects. Even though it took several generations to denounce pagan beliefs after royal families adopted Christianity, by the end of the 15th Century most of the region was fully Christianised.

During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church and local rulers became close allies. Thousands of church buildings sprang up and the economy flourished with the emergence of the Hanseatic League, an alliance of 70 trading ports that maintained a trade monopoly along the Baltic coast from the 13th to the 17th Century. Sea trading spread new agricultural technologies including metals from Germany and new agricultural techniques from Denmark. Even though many farmers resisted the introduction of metal tools due to their religious beliefs and saw them as violating pagan deities, agricultural technologies spread rapidly and enabled the cultivation of new lands, which was essential for sustaining the swelling population in the mediaeval Baltics.

A major interruption in this period of economic prosperity and growth was the Black Death, which reached the region in the 1350s, killing about one-third of the population and bringing famine and despair. During the years of Black Death the Church, the rulers and nobility reduced their taxation, enabling larger farms to better sustain themselves. Smaller and poorer farms that could hardly pay rents during the years of prosperity ended up losing everything. After slaughtering all the animals and letting their land fallow, these farms depended fully on the labour of weakened family members to subsist. Not surprisingly, these small farms were unable to recover even after the plague passed. Due to the Black Death, the number of free, tax-paying farmers was significantly reduced and large areas of land were acquired by the rul-
ing elites and the Church, along with families of destitute peasants. These processes led to a strengthening of the feudal system in the region.

**Feudalism**

Nevertheless, feudalism in the Baltic territories was different from in the rest of Europe. Unlike Western and Central Europe, where manorial estates were the most prevalent form of agricultural establishment and where peasants were considered the private property of the landlord, mediaeval rural societies in the Baltic region were dominated by medium and small-scale farmers who were also relatively free in terms of participating in economic activities outside of their lord’s estate. In addition, peasants in most of the Baltic region were not subject to their landlord’s jurisdictional power. In the case of medium-size alluvial farms, the farmers were not only legally free, but also owned their land and estates. Rather than paying a lord, these farmers were taxed by the Crown and required to furnish a knight and mounted horse in times of war.

Such ‘soft’ feudalism was mostly found in Denmark, Central Sweden, Lithuania and Poland, while more traditional feudal societies with highly hierarchical and exploitative lord-vassal relations were prevalent in Russia, Prussia and the territories of contemporary Czech Republic. During the Renaissance and pre-Modern era, 16th to early 18th Century, regional differences were exacerbated due to the changing political landscape. The Polish-Lithuanian state was significantly weakened by internal quarrels and an unstable economy, and at the end of the 18th Century it was split among Russia, Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The territories that were included into the Russian Empire experienced the loss of the mid-level alluvial farmers, who were turned into serfs. In Sweden, Denmark and Prussia, on the other hand, such mid-level free farmers flourished as they were the beneficiaries of the economic growth fuelled by the Hanseatic League. The spread of the Reformation as a counter movement to the Catholic Church removed the burden of taxation from peasant shoulders and also brought ideological justification for their independence. In Sweden, the 18th Century brought a transition from absolutism to a parliamentary form of government and rapid industrialisation. Farmers gained the right to purchase clear title to their lands and became relatively independent economic subjects in the globalising economy.

Russia followed an altogether different trajectory of rural development. The structure of Russian agriculture was founded on the peasant commune (mir), an institution dating back to Kievan Rus’ in the 10th and 11th Century AD. A typical community consisted of peasants who pooled their labour and resources, but also practised a form of local self-government. They made decisions on land use, crop rotation and labour allocation and settled disputes in the village assembly, which was usually presided over by the village elder. In the 15th and 16th Century, such systems were increasingly transferred to the hands of lords appointed by Russian tsars and these communes were thereby turned into exploitative manorial estates and the peasants into the private property of the lords. This rural system in Russia survived until the 20th century.

**18th to 20th Centuries**

**18th Century – Shifting Farms**

The period from the mid-18th to the mid-19th Century saw the rapid modernisation of agriculture in the Western Baltics. At the beginning of this period houses and barns belonging to several families were still standing close together in a village and the cultivated area was split up into several small lots, the result of centuries of inheritance and marriages. By the mid-19th Century, however, farms were redeveloped and moved far apart, with each farm having a few large fields around it. The old village was split up and the farming land redistributed among the families. Introduced by the state authorities, these agrarian land reforms were enforced with military power. In addition, pasture that used to belong to the villagers collectively was divided into individual lots and cultivated.

Such a transformation was enabled by the introduction of new agricultural technologies as well as by the liberalisation of markets and the emergence of capitalist economies. After Jethro Tull developed seeding and weeding technologies at the turn of the 18th Century, his inventions spread throughout the region enabling larger fields to be worked with fewer hands. With the imple-
mentation of selective breeding, the livestock reared on Swedish, Prussian and especially Danish farms was pure-bred and much more productive than just a century earlier. Furthermore, the use of root vegetables in fallow fields allowed the land to be used more efficiently and provided an important source of fodder to support more livestock throughout the year. As a result of these developments agricultural outputs grew, as did the wealth and influence of farm owners, who invested in buying land and building the first truly modern agricultural farms.

Despite the improvements in farming technologies, the life of smaller farmers remained monotonous and physically taxing. They continued to live on their farms growing their own food and selling their labour for money. For them, meat was a luxury they could only eat in late autumn, when they slaughtered their animals because they did not have enough fodder for the winter. They lived mainly on cereal-based porridge, potatoes, bread, butter and water.

Social Conditions and Class Structure
Life on the smallholder farms in the early Industrial era usually consisted of four stages: 1) childhood, 2) hired labour, 3) establishing a household/starting a family, and 4) living into the old age as part of the children’s households. Most of the children stayed at home until Confirmation at about 14-16 years. By the mid-18th Century children received at least some formal elementary education, including lessons in reading and writing. Quite often their first teachers were their mothers, suggesting that literacy in rural populations in the Baltics was distributed evenly between the sexes. Unfortunately, the poorest of the farmers had to let their children start working at a much younger age, depriving them of their education. After spending 10 to 20 years working as hired help on larger estates, the young got married and established a new household on a piece of land that was partly or wholly inherited from their parents and relatives.
Estate owners, on the other hand, were shielded from the economic and environmental pressures that shaped the lives of poorer farming populations. First, with better nutrition and hired help they were able to have more children whose mortality rates were considerably lower and most of whom grew into adulthood. Second, their children received a better education and were prepared for the jobs that the Industrial Revolution brought, such as the government and academic positions that were usually held by the nobles in earlier centuries. The aristocracy became less exclusive and social mobility increased, enabling the descendants of the rural elites to enter their ranks.

Overall, the concentration of farming land in the hands of the larger farmers and the increase in population in the region and Europe more generally meant that there were a lot of people who did not own any land at all. In addition to the poor farmers who were hardly able to hold onto their land, a class of rural proletariat without property started forming. A consequence of the modernisation of agriculture in the Western states of the Baltic region was that the numbers of the rural proletariat skyrocketed and wealth was increasingly concentrated in the hands of the wealthiest farmers, leading to the stratification of rural societies. Some of the landless succeed in finding jobs in the rapidly growing towns, where the developing industries needed more workers. However, many were forced to stay on the farms of their relatives as permanent labourers unable to form their own households.

A different set of challenges was faced by the peasants on the eastern coast of the Baltics, in the Russian Empire, who continued to live in serfdom. Despite rebellions and significant social unrest in the first half of the 1860s, they continued to endure exploitation, disparagement and physical abuse from their lords.

In the mid-19th Century, facing increasing pressures from abroad and criticism from the Russian intelligentsia, Tsar Alexander II abolished serfdom. Although officially emancipated from serfdom, the peasants’ life changed.
very little. The overwhelming majority remained impoverished and continued to rent land and homes from their former landlords well into the 20th Century. The agricultural reforms including Stolypin’s reform of 1906 that sought to develop a capitalist agricultural system ‘from above’ by banning collective land working systems, imposing private land ownership laws, and supporting the development of large-scale industrial farms. However this failed and most farms continued to function as manorial estates. Even though these reforms laid the groundwork for a market-based agricultural system for Russian peasants, they failed to be implemented on the wider scale, leaving most of Russia’s peasants living in an essentially feudal society.

Modernisation of Rural Societies

In the 19th Century agriculture in the Western Baltic region flourished. New technologies such as drainage, fertilisers and steel plows significantly reshaped the landscape and rural lifestyles. Simultaneously, the development of steamships, the construction of railroad and road networks, the introduction of the electric telegraph and especially the liberalisation of the economy enabled the estates not only to sell their products in market towns, but also to enter the global marketplace. With these developments the predominantly agricultural economy shifted from village to private farm-based agriculture, as farms continued to consolidate and settlements became spread out even further than before. However, as in the previous century, these developments did not bring economic or social improvements for the growing rural proletariat. By the turn of the 20th Century, a mass exodus to the United States took place as Swedes, Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Finns and Russians left their villages and became cheap labour for American factories, mines, farms and cities.

The 19th Century was also marked by the spread of nationalism, an idea that common language, history and culture constitute strong invisible bonds among groups who live in the same territory. In the Baltic region nationalism was built on rural nationalism, which regarded peasantry as the true steward of authentic national culture. In early forms of its inception Baltic nationalism was tied to liberation movements and called for constitutional reforms that would grant more rights to individuals as well as the liberation of nations occupied by Prussia and the Russian Empire, such as Poland, Finland, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. Despite the fact that national liberation movements relied on the ideals of agrarian nationalism, most of the members of these movements came from elite backgrounds and urban environments and had little to do with the daily lives and identities of rural inhabitants. In the context of national revival, rural societies continued to live as highly hierarchical systems organised around the ownership of land and resources, gender and age.

More broadly, the Industrial Revolution brought positive changes to the Western Baltic countries, significantly increasing their GDP and building wealth for their individual citizens. The introduction of taxation, voting reforms and the installation of national military service led to the establishment of Sweden, Denmark and Prussia as advanced nation states and avant-garde industrial economies in the world. In addition, with the 1917 Russian Revolution the Russian Empire crumbled, leading to the foundation of the independent nation states of Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

In these newly formed countries, extensive agricultural reforms were implemented that were designed to...
modernise and industrialise agriculture. In just two decades between 1917 and the beginning of World War II in 1939, these nations built agrarian economies by redistributing the land and giving it to the landless, supporting individual farmers financially and politically, and liberalising market economies. These reforms led to the further dissolution of the villages and the consolidation of individual farmers estates. Just as in the Western Baltics in the 19th Century, many of these estates did not succeed and mass migrations to cities and the US occurred. The largest and most advanced estates flourished throughout the 1920s and 1930s, while small and medium-sized farms started to get stronger only on the eve of the World War II.

The Russian Revolution – Collectivisation
For Russia, the Revolution brought a very different form of modern agriculture. Instead of individual farmers operating as relatively independent economic units, the new system was based on socialist ideals of collective ownership of land and resources. At first, the Bolsheviks viewed collectivisation as a natural process during which Russian peasants would pool their land and resources together to create large, efficient cooperatives. Due to persistent food shortages and misconceived ideas about peasants as enemies of the proletariat who were prone to retain their bourgeois inclinations, collectivisation was accompanied by public humiliation, violence, mass arrests and deportations. After having signed the agreement, the peasants were forced to hand over their land and livestock to the kolkhoz and work as agricultural labourers with little pay in kind. Those who refused to sign were taxed heavily and persecuted for evading the taxes. Even after joining collective farms, they were often considered enemies of the people or kulaks, who had to be liquidated as a class. Even though peasants resisted by destroying their own property and livestock, the government continued to take extreme measures to requisition grain from the peasants, sometimes even taking their seed grain.

The results of collectivisation were devastating. One estimate suggests that between the summer of 1929 and March 1930, the government confiscated land and property from some 7 million peasants and the number of gulag inmates increased from 28,000 to 2 million. Starting in 1932, a widespread famine swept through Russia and Ukraine, killing 5-6 million people. Even during the years of famine, Stalin continued to export grain abroad and deliberately suppressed news of the famine to the outside world, thus preventing foreign aid from reaching the starving peasants. The modernisation of agriculture in the Soviet Union bore a high human cost.

Leaving Traditional Rural Society Behind
At the end of the 19th Century in the western Baltic region agriculture reached its peak. At least 85% of the workforce was busy in the agricultural sector. Large state programs were initiated to stimulate the increase of farm-
land. In the east the peak was later but the same dynamics were present. Living standards in the countryside were still poor as compared to today’s standards, particularly in Tsarist and socialist Russia, as it was for almost everyone at this time.

Since the turn of the 20th Century, the area of arable land in the Baltic watershed regions has been in decline, as less valuable land was reforested or set aside for pastures. With industrialisation, agricultural landscapes changed significantly through the increasing domination of monoculture production, consolidation of small-scale farms into larger units, and the growth of rural infrastructures such as roads, trains, and communication lines. Modern granaries, sugar mills, industrial livestock feedlots, meat processing facilities, and heavy machinery, replaced local barns and horse drawn plows and carriages. Rural livelihoods changed, too, as people became more mobile and, leaving farming behind, often found jobs and started commuting or relocating to urban centers.

In the backdrop of these major agrarian changes, it is easy for us to idealize and romanticize simple rural lifestyles, as they appear in the nostalgic images of the “traditional countryside.” We should remember though that living in these “traditional” rural societies meant hardship, that relying on local cycles of nutrient turnover translated into shortage and even famine, that herding cows in the wooded meadows, driving horse-drawn carriages, or feeding pigs household leftovers required enormous amount of backbreaking labor, skill, knowledge, effort, and determination.

Given these issues, it is hopeful to see signs of new developments in Baltic rural societies that seek to balance the vision of traditional lifestyles with post-industrial realities, particularly in efforts to preserve local rural livelihoods, culinary and agricultural skills, and diverse rural landscapes. Various initiatives have been set up and funded by the European Union and the national governments across the region that include the maintenance of wooded meadows with their uniquely rich biodiversity, restoration of local breeds of domesticated animals such as cows, goats and even hens, and perhaps most importantly, the restoration of summer houses and dachas by the new inhabitants who are willing to come back to the countryside, even if for vacations.
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