



Panel

1.4. „Virgin Lands“: Land Reclamation Campaigns in the Twentieth Century. A Rural Development History

Panel organiser: Unger, Corinna, Jacobs University Bremen, Germany; Frey, Marc, Jacobs University Bremen, Germany

Development history is rarely considered part of rural history. The history of development – the process of changing and, possibly, “improving” socioeconomic structures, living standards, and livelihoods – has long been written as a story revolving around industrialization and urbanization, steel mills and highways, hospitals and universities in so-called “developing countries”. What has been missing in many development accounts is the rural side of development. Seeing that the majority of the countries in question were predominantly rural, villages, agriculture and rural populations have received much less attention than they deserve. In our panel we would like to challenge this notion by bringing rural history and development history together. To do so, we would like to present case studies on land reclamation campaigns in different parts of the world in the twentieth century. The developmental idea of “opening up” new land for agricultural cultivation has been a constant in rural history. Hence, land reclamation campaigns can shed light on the relation between development history and rural history. The panel is inspired by a larger project on the international history of rural development.

Chair: Unger, Corinna, Jacobs University Bremen, Germany

Monday 19.8.2013 // 1100 – 1300 // Session 1 – Room A 201

1.4.1. Dutch Land Reclamation and Settlement Projects in the Interwar Period

Paper

Van de Grift, Liesbeth, Radboud University Nijmegen, Netherlands

Ever since the agricultural crisis at the end of the nineteenth century hit large parts of Europe, the plight of the farming population had been cause for grave concern. The Netherlands proved no exception in this respect: several State Commissions were appointed in the first half of the twentieth century to study the socio-economic situation of the rural population and recommend suggestions to improve their lot. Pressing questions concerned the shortage of land and the exorbitant rates which tenant farmers were obliged to pay landowners in the framework of the existing tenure system. In general, and for several reasons that will be elaborated on, Dutch politicians shared a scepticism towards increased government intervention and proved reluctant to encroach on property rights. There was one notable exception, however: the lands that were reclaimed from the Zuiderzee in 1930. Politicians and experts perceived them as a clean slate on which they could experiment with new forms of government intervention and carry out important agricultural reforms. In this paper, the ideal visions of an improved rural order that were projected on ‘virgin lands’ as well as the ways in which the proposed reconfigurations were legitimized will be examined. They will provide an insight into prevailing conceptions regarding the (degree of) importance attributed and the role ascribed to the agricultural community within society as a whole in the interwar period.

1.4.2. Agrarian Development in sub-Saharan Africa from the 1920s to the Present: The Office du Niger in Mali

Paper

Frey, Marc, Jacobs University Bremen, Germany

The Office du Niger (ON) is a large irrigation scheme in the interior delta of the Niger. On 100.000 hectares of irrigated land, about 150.000 farmers produce rice, cotton, vegetables and other produce mainly for the national market. Described as a show case for the feasibility of the Green Revolution in sub-Saharan Africa, the ON has absorbed more than a billion dollars in development assistance since the early 1980s. But financial self-sufficiency is not in sight. The reasons for this are complex and have to do with governance, technology, economic boundary conditions, and the ways peasants farm and go about their business. In a larger sense, however, the challenges the ON faces are rooted deeply in history. Designed in the 1920s as a land reclamation project of the colonial administration, the French forcibly re-settled tens of thousands of people to work on this large irrigation scheme. The ON reflects the checkered history of agrarian development doctrines put into practice between the late colonial period and the present day. And it epitomizes the changing conceptions on farmers, rural governance, and socio-economic transformation in rural Sub-Saharan African areas.

1.4.3. The Virgin Lands Campaign, Khrushchev’s Secret Rehabilitation of the Gulag

Paper

Pohl, Michaela, Vassar College, USA

This paper discusses the Virgin Lands campaign in the Akmolinsk/Astana region of Northern Kazakhstan, initiated by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954. The name Virgin Lands is intentionally misleading. It hides one of Khrushchev’s greatest achievements, the rehabilitation of a vast region of the gulag. The rivers and land of the Akmolinsk region had been the domain of Kazakhs of the Middle Horde and had a long history of Russian settlement. Northern Kazakhstan was the focus of rural reforms and land reclamation under Prime Minister Stolypin (assassinated in 1911). In the 1930s and 1940s the region became one of the main sites of the streams of prisoners and exiles sent into the Soviet camp and “special settler” system. My paper gives an overview of what worked and what did not in terms of large-scale mechanization, extensive land use, and decades of investments (often vanity projects), and educational policies. The paper shows how the “Virgin Lands” fared under Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Nazarbaev, from the point of view of long-term residents as well as “settlers” and newcomers, and demonstrates how “Virgin Lands” local and agricultural history was tightly connected to high politics in St. Petersburg and Moscow, until Akmolinsk/Tselinograd became the new Kazakh capital, Astana.

Participants

Frey, Marc

Marc Frey received his PhD and his habilitation from the University of Cologne. He holds the Helmut Schmidt Chair of International History at Jacobs University Bremen. He has written on early 20th century European political and economic history, on late colonialism and decolonization in Southeast Asia, and on U.S. policies towards decolonization. More recently, he has become interested in the global history of development cooperation and in particular agrarian development cooperation in the 20th century.

Pohl, Michaela

Miki Pohl is Associate Professor of History at Vassar College. She received her B.A. in Liberal Studies from the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington (1989), and Ph.D. in modern Russian history from Indiana University at Bloomington, Indiana (1999). Her research focuses on the Soviet Union after Stalin. Other research and teaching interests include the history of Kazakhstan and Chechnya, diasporas in the borderlands of the former Soviet Union, youth and children in Russia and Europe, and Russian and Eurasian popular culture.

Unger, Corinna

Corinna Unger is Associate Professor of Modern European History at Jacobs University Bremen. She received her PhD in history from the University of Freiburg, Germany, and worked at the German Historical Institute Washington, DC, as a postdoc. Her current research focuses on development and modernization policies and practices in the post-1945 period, particularly in India, and on the history of population studies.

Van de Grift, Liesbeth

Liesbeth van de Grift is Assistant Professor Political History and German Studies at the Radboud University Nijmegen. Before that she worked at Utrecht University. Her dissertation was published in 2012: *Securing the Communist State: The Reconstruction of Coercive Institutions in the Soviet Zone of Germany and Romania, 1944-1948*. Her current research project entitled ‘Brave New Worlds: Internal Colonisation in Europe, 1910-1940’ focuses on cases of internal colonisation in the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden.