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‘Living standards in the early Soviet Union and interwar Bulgaria: Rich peasants and poor workers?’

We challenge the revisionist account of improving living standards for workers in the 1930s Soviet Union by drawing on new sources for rural and urban living conditions in the late Tsarist Empire and the early Soviet Union. Our data suggest that urban living standards did not rise under Stalin’s forced industrialisation policy 1928-40 and probably even fell. Cities did not pull labour sufficiently from the Russian countryside, and coercion likely played an important role in achieving structural change. Our evidence challenges the living standard perspective presented in Allen (1998, 2003) and is more in line with the recent research by Allen&Khaustova (2019), and it challenges existing accounts on how Soviet industrialisation worked in practice. We also present new evidence on rural living standards in the early Soviet Union; an important element which has missed so far in the debate on interwar Soviet industrialisation efforts. We compare the Soviet data with arguably the best counterfactual available in Central, East and South-East Europe, namely Bulgaria, i.e., a country which hardly underwent any structural change in the 1920s and 1930s. Why? So far unused source material allows us to document living standard developments both in the countryside and in the cities for 1848-1963. In the interwar period, Bulgaria peasants (ca. 80% of the population) enjoyed a surprisingly comfortable life and, in turn, had very little incentive to move to the cities, thus preventing urbanisation and industrialisation. Our data suggest that coercion was essential in achieving structural change in the Bulgarian case. After World War II, the new communist government had to make deliberate efforts to undermine living standards in the countryside if it wanted to achieve structural change along the model pioneered by the Soviet Union.