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Review of the book:

Barons and Farmers —
Continuity and Transformations
in Rural Estonia 1816–1994
written by Ray Abrahams and Juhan Kahk

Unlike other Central European countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia found itself in a unique situation. Estonia not only got rid of Communism, but also regained its own statehood. Today, after a few years of changes, we are all well aware of the complexity and obstacles in the process of transition from centralised to free market economy. It is difficult to reconstruct family farms after all these decades of collective agriculture. In Estonia, however, this reconstruction is relatively easy since rural people in this country not only remember family farming, but generations of private farmers have 'survived' to the present day. This process of reconstruction is influenced both by modern political or economic interrelations and the past traditions which are deeply rooted in Estonians consciousness and collective memory of society.

The book consists of two parts: the historical part, written by an Estonian historian — Juhan Kahk: and the contemporary part whose author is a social anthropologist in Cambridge — Ray Abrahams. The authors had two goals. Firstly, they intended to trace historical and ethnic transformations in the rural community of Estonia. Secondly, they undertook a comparative analysis of some chosen characteristics put in historical perspective.

One of the problems which emerged during their study, was the conflict between small farms and landed properties. This conflict provided the framework for the analysis of transformation in rural Estonia. This conflict has recurred in the history of rural areas since the early nineteenth century. In the beginning there was a clash of interest between landed properties, the

majority of which were owned by German barons, and the peasant farms which had just begun to gain independence as a result of land reforms. What the authors felt was most interesting was a time convergence between the enfranchisement and a growing consciousness of Estonians. After land reform was carried out in the interwar independent country, farmers gained the upper hand over barons. In turn, The Soviet collectivism brought the supremacy of new large scale farms — kolkhozes — and then sovhozes with the peasant farms totally suppressed. Then began the era of dominance by the barons. This time, they were Red Barons — that is, heads of the farming co-operatives — the kolkhozes — and directors of state farms — sovhozes.

Having gained independence, Estonian rural areas and agriculture faced the problem of choosing their own model of development. Again, conflict arose between large and small scale landed properties. On the one hand, over two hundred thousand eager people applied for the return of their former property. On the other hand, the former state and co-operative farms resisted their own dissolution. Moreover, some legislative obstacles and problems occurred concerning the ownership of the land. The resistance has been so strong that barely eight to ten thousand family farms have been established to date, compared to the one hundred and forty thousand that existed before the outbreak of World War II.

One may criticise the book for what it fails to mention. For example, it lacks an answer to one fundamental question — what is the proper route for rural Estonia to take? To be quite frank, the question is so far unanswerable. One may also wonder how Estonian agriculture would have developed if the country had not been swallowed by the Soviet Empire with many people sent to penal colonies in Siberia in 1949. With the risk of over simplification, we can assume that if it were not for the Soviet occupation, Estonian agriculture would have developed along the same lines as Finnish farming. These two countries have numerous historical similarities. Ray Abrahams is in a unique position to make such comparisons. Married to a Finnish woman and carrying out research in Finland and Estonia, he learnt a great deal about rural regions in these countries. However, are these comparisons of any cognitive or instructive value? They are, provided the differences and restrictions are taken into consideration.

What the authors should be commended for are some other contents of the book. The concept in itself is an interesting one, as is the context in which it has been written. The attitude of the authors also prove to be interesting. The historical analyses interwoven with the real cases cited by Kahk are complemented excellently by the anthropological interpretations by Abrahams. Numerous examples are illustrated. These two points of view, different not only in professional but also in geographical terms — Kahk, Estonian. stuck in the described reality, and Abrahams, British,

looking in from the outside — made it possible for the analysis of such complex transformations to be remarkably reliable and restrained. The assumed task of the book was accomplished properly. The book, published by the University Press in Goeteborg, should be recommended as an absorbing source of information for anyone who is interested in transformations in European agriculture. Moreover, the book proves helpful to understand fully the changes in Estonian rural areas.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

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2. Ray Abrahams, *Between East and West: Family Farming in Finland and Estonia*, the paper delivered at the conference: *Family Farming in the Contemporary World: East–West Comparisons*, Kraków, 29th May–1st June 1995.