

Consumer Cooperatives from the Macro- and Microeconomic Perspective



Jan Slavíček: Ze světa podnikání do světa plánované distribuce. Proměny spotřebního družstevnictví v letech 1945–1956 na příkladu severních Čech [From the World of Enterprise to the World of Planned Distribution: Transformation of the Consumer Cooperatives in Years 1945–1956 on the Example of Northern Bohemia], Prague: Univerzita Karlova, Filozofická fakulta 2017, 393 pp.

The aim of the paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of the role of consumer cooperatives in a period that brought about transformation of consumer cooperatives from business entities into subordinate links of organised distribution. In the introduction, the author asks how consumer cooperatives functioned. Due to the carefully selected time period, post-war developments can be observed at specific cooperatives in northern Bohemia. The author agrees with the concept of limited democracy, which refers to the period 1945–1948 in the territory of Czechoslovakia, which is characterised by attempts of the cooperatives to build on the First Republic growth. July 1948 saw the passage of Act No. 187/1948 Coll. on the Central Council of Cooperatives, thus limiting the next period, which is connected with the onset of Sovietisation and the subordination of cooperatives to the state. Another milestone was the year 1953, when rural consumer cooperatives were introduced in the Soviet style. In 1956, a proposal was made for a new organisational structure that abandoned the Soviet way of cooperative management and went back to district associations.

Another goal of the author was to find out for whom the cooperatives worked. The answer is not uniform and differs according to the historical period. A cooperative member (cooperative) merges into the centre of interest, but loses his role as a shareholder and becomes only a customer. The state comes to the fore, which does not allow the creation of lower prices for the cooperatives. The original roles of the cooperative take the back seat.

The monograph by Jan Slavíček dealing with Czech consumer cooperatives is divided into six main chapters and fourteen subchapters. The book focuses on several major businesses in northern Bohemia in 1945–1956 and, thanks to the macroeconomic and microeconomic research approach, yields a new insight into the whole phenomenon.

The Fontes edition brought a number of significant historical works to the market, and in this case, it has afforded us a unique insight into consumer cooperatives. Jan Slavíček supplemented the book with graphs and tables that illustrate the situation in the cooperative sector not only in the defined years, but also in the preceding period. I very much appreciate their clear inclusion in the text, which enables the reader to instantly compare different periods and themes. The index is alphabetic and contains a list of names that is distinguished in bold lettering from other entries. The list of abbreviations is also expanded by a list of abbreviations in quotes.

The book builds on a rich source base that includes primary sources from a number of archives, legal and statistical sources, and secondary literature that includes a wide



range of foreign and Czech titles. The author also used an oral-historical method, which is not used too often in titles of this type. Memories of JUDr. Jan Slabý and Marta Voldřichová add a personal view to the whole issue. Due to the time of the creation of primary sources and in some cases of secondary literature, it is very important to approach the sources critically. The author was aware of this pitfall and already, in the beginning of the book, evaluated the state of the documents and their use in the book.

Three annexes, namely: Resolution of the Political Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia of 23 July 1952, which deals with the cooperative reorganisation, the First Republic Statutes of the West Bohemian Consumer Cooperative in Plzeň and the Statutes of the Association of 1952 are included at the end of the book. The readers will be able to look into specific documents that have influenced consumer cooperatives in the Czech Republic. At the same time, it is possible to understand the operation of the consumer cooperatives and their legal treatment in the 1950s.

The first chapter deals with the historical development and definition of consumer cooperatives, and not only in the territory of the Czech Lands. The author continues in this chapter to the present, especially in connection with the umbrella cooperative organisation: International Co-operative Alliance. At the same time, he describes the legal aspects of cooperatives and the reasons for the formation of the first consumer cooperatives, and defines the basic cooperative values. Compared to other publications, the author treats in detail different historical events that have influenced cooperatives, to a greater or lesser extent. The last subchapter of this section is devoted to the role of consumer cooperatives until 1945, including socio-supportive, educational, political, estates, and distribution roles. The author has compared their importance in particular historical periods.

In the second chapter, the author describes on 111 pages the development of the organisational structure in 1945–1956. The first part shows the general developments after the Second World War in the territory of Bohemia. The second, larger part of this chapter focuses on the Ústí nad Labem Region and includes the demographic development and the activities of the cooperatives in the different districts of the region. Due to the reorganisation of Czechoslovak consumer cooperatives under the influence of the Soviet Union, which was approved in 1952 and undermined cooperatives in the territory of Czechoslovakia, one of the sub-chapters is devoted to Soviet consumer cooperatives until 1952. The chapter includes the development of cooperatives in the territory of Czechoslovakia before the planned reform, during the reorganisation negotiations and afterwards, followed by a further reorganisation in 1956. The integration of the reorganisation process in the individual districts of Ústí nad Labem in this chapter is a comprehensive overview of the issue and is richly supported by both primary and secondary sources.

The role of consumer cooperatives is examined in the third chapter, which includes, among other things, the statutes and institutional changes until 1956, not only in the territory of Czechoslovakia, but also in the Soviet Union, with an emphasis on rural consumer cooperatives. The author, on the example of consumer cooperatives, points out the functioning of the rationing system and the overall functioning of the economy after the Second World War in the territory of Czechoslovakia.

The following chapter deals with the emergence and development of the retail network of consumer cooperatives in Czechoslovakia in 1945–1956. The author, in the first part, draws attention to the insufficient source base, which for some years is completely lacking and, above all, to the content of the existing documents that were created in connection with the solution of the problems. Their major drawback is a lack of a consistent balance sheet and the recording of profits and losses. In addition, the centrally planned economy in Czechoslovakia after 1948 is examined in the economic outcomes of the retail turnover plan and does not use the basic concepts of economic efficiency. Nevertheless, the author managed to create an overview of the sales network, including the number of employees of consumer cooperatives, a comparison of the salary conditions of cooperative employees and other professions, a comparison of turnovers of shops and consumer cooperatives, the fulfilment of the plan and, last but not least, the problems of consumer cooperatives in the aforementioned period.

The place of consumer cooperatives in the CPC policy is the title of the next chapter. It deals with changes in the relationship between cooperatives and the Communist Party, at all stages of the period under review. Part of the chapter is also the social, political and professional composition of consumer cooperatives in the 1950s. The author has combined the results of several primary sources and has created a comprehensive table that compares education, social background, age and other parameters in three specific consumer cooperatives. The cooperative press has also undergone development. The end of the chapter demonstrates political moods in Czechoslovakia and is complemented by a selection of period cartoons from cooperative newspapers.

A specific development was made in 1945–1950 by the cooperative of the Socialist Group for the Settlement of the Borderlands in the Děčín district and the author included this in a separate chapter. It is a microeconomic outlook that makes it easier to interconnect an industrial enterprise and a consumer cooperative. Jan Slavíček takes a detailed look at the legal form, the statutes and the performance of the cooperative. In this part, it would be good to describe a cooperative in a similar way in order to allow the reader to compare the functioning of different businesses.

The book by Jan Slavíček is a work examining the cooperative phenomenon in its entirety, both from the macro and microeconomic perspective. The author is aware of the shortcomings associated with the lack of primary resources and the limits of his work, but I think he has avoided these pitfalls deftly. Extending the work on historical development in and outside Czechoslovakia allows a comparison of development and reorganisation of consumer cooperatives in the 1950s. Although the publication has a large supplement of tables and graphs, it would be a good idea to expand the picture supplement to help illustrate the development of consumer cooperative publications and advertisements.

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