Corn Crusade provides a long overdue look into Khrushchev’s agrarian policy. So far our knowledge about Soviet agrarian society stops with a few exceptions after collectivization in the 1930s. Portraits of the Soviet countryside seem to be frozen in that time. With the hesitant return of (new) economic history this picture is slowly beginning to change. Aaron Hale-Dorrell certainly belongs among those who push us to reconsider longstanding tropes. His book argues for a profound re-thinking of Khrushchev’s agrarian policy and for a re-interpretation of his politics overall. Like stagnation, a term coined by Gorbachev to distance himself from his predecessor Brezhnev, the notion of an erratic and hectic Khrushchev is an idea propagated by those who followed after his ouster – with which they set the tone for years to come. Mirroring the critique about the term „stagnation“, Aaron Hale-Dorrell claims that historians too easily followed the interpretation of the party generation after Khrushchev who mocked the former General Secretary for his endless campaigns, harebrained ideas and impromptu turns. Aaron Hale-Dorrell’s mission is to correct this picture by focusing on the many aspects of the Corn Crusade that place Khrushchev in a transnational network of science-oriented political and economic leaders who developed and implemented a model of industrial agriculture. His aim is to write a „crossed history of technology“ (p. 6) and to place the Soviet Union within the modernization of agriculture across the globe.

Aaron Hale-Dorrell does not shy away from large claims, and he makes plenty of them. In reckoning with the current state of research he demonstrates the radical change Khrushchev initiated by essentially starting a „revolution in agriculture“ (p. 1). The Soviet countryside of 1964 had nothing to do with the Soviet peasants’ lives in 1953. Khrushchev modernized food and agricultural production since, according to Hale-Dorrell, he believed in the project of communism as living in abundance for many rather than a good living for a privileged few (as in Stalinism). Hale-Dorrell furthermore claims that Khrushchev’s agrarian policy was not irrational but in line with current global trends, which relied heavily on science and technology and corn as THE crop for fodder and animal husbandry. It was the US-American example of industrial farming, after all, which promised success.

Each chapter (with the exception of chapter 1, which provides the history prior to 1953) examines the period from 1953 to 1964 from various perspectives. Chapter 2 starts off with a transnational history of corn in the 1950s. Hale-Dorrell shows the decisive role the United States played in Khrushchev’s vision and the extent of convergence between Soviet and American visions of agrarian modernity. A first Soviet delegation with the future minister for agriculture Matsu-kevich visited the United States and Canada in 1955. In the efficient and mechanized American agriculture the Soviets encountered industrial farming for the first time – and corn as its linchpin. Immediately after a third delegation had travelled to the United States in 1959 – this time with Khrushchev visiting Iowa – the corn crusade was launched.

After having pictured the promising future in chapter 2, the chapters 3, 7 and 8 explore the limits of Khrushchev’s corn policy on the ground. In chapter 3 it is „an officialdom long conditioned by practices inherited from Stalin“ (p. 85) that limits Khrushchev’s vision...
of socialism. In chapter 7 it is the bureaucracy (again), which „stifled innovations, including potentially beneficial ones“ (p. 195) and in chapter 8 it is the regions and their powerful secretaries who boycotted the corn crusade. As much as Khrushchev’s Corn Crusade had serious limitations by bureaucracy and regional party elites, it mobilized many enthusiasts on the ground, so Hale-Dorrell. In two chapters (4 and 5) he explores the press campaigns for corn and the many Komsomol activists who went to or stayed in the countryside to make Khrushchev’s dream of abundance come true. The author closely follows two regional examples from the agrarian showroom Stavropol krai and Lithuania. His range of sources presented in this book is impressive; he covers many of Khrushchev’s speeches on agriculture, ego-documents, party protocols, newspapers, eleven archives from state to the regional level and popular culture, pictures et al.

Hale-Dorrell’s book is as much about corn and agrarian policy as about Khrushchev himself. In juxtaposing Khrushchev’s modern vision and belief in science with local resistance and ignorance, Hale-Dorrell delivers a narrative which eventually is surprisingly orthodox. Corn Crusade tells the history of a leading man who was too ambitious and progressive for the Soviet world around him. Stalin’s heritage looms large in sentences like „The apparently overwhelming authority he [Khrushchev] possessed made others powerless to openly resist corn“ (p. 230). For Hale-Dorrell it was Khrushchev’s expertise and enthusiasm together with the remnants of Stalinist decision-making that developed into a vicious circle and obstructed the Corn Crusade. Although Hale-Dorrell is aware of the many systematic and structural reasons which hampered the development of industrial farming in the Soviet Union (when he discusses the many failed wage-reforms in Soviet agriculture in chapter 6 for instance) he nevertheless struggles to find a balance between blaming Khrushchev only (the traditional historiographic approach) and blaming everybody else but Khrushchev (his approach). Even though corn as a cultural symbol vanished from Soviet newspapers simultaneously with Khrushchev in 1964, corn did become a regular staple in Soviet agriculture as Hale-Dorrell discusses briefly in his epilogue. In this sense, the bureaucracy and the regional leaders must have been less of a bulwark against corn cultivation than the book admits. Nevertheless, Aaron Hale-Dorrell succeeds in changing our perspective on the seemingly doomed Corn Crusade by placing corn into a transnational context of industrial agriculture. The book is thoroughly researched, full of ideas and thus hopefully accelerates the comeback of agriculture into Soviet Studies. But beware: after having read this book jokes about Khrushchev and corn might not be as funny anymore.