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Abstract

This paper is part of a broader project devoted to understanding the evolution of state-society relations in an East European village under a series of different regimes: fascism, state socialism, and market democracy. The village, called Kisszelmenc by its Hungarian-speaking inhabitants and Solontsy by Soviet cartographers, consists of a single street that ends abruptly at its western edge at a barbed wire fence. The fence marks an international border: it once enclosed the western limits of Soviet space; today, it guards the eastern edge of the European Union. This paper addresses a critical juncture in Solontsy's trajectory, as the Soviet Union emerged from war, extended its influence westward, and struggled to regain control over a population reeling from destruction, hunger, and loss. The paper attempts to establish some of the basic parameters of political economy in this period and place. It finds, just a few hundred yards inside the heavily guarded western cordon of newly occupied Soviet territory, a population that strategically deployed its labor resources and selectively, but regularly and openly, thumbed its nose at state demands. The people of Solontsy did so, this paper suggests, not out of any explicit political conviction, but in order to protect the economy of individual households.