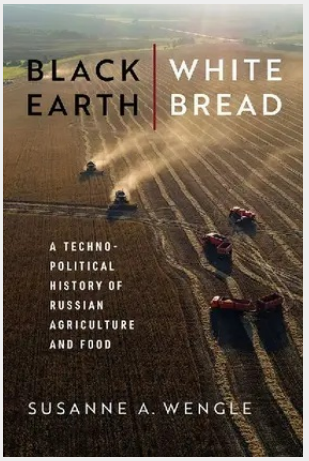
Susanne A. Wengle is the Nancy R. Dreux associate professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame and the author of Post-Soviet Power: State-Led Development and Russia&#39 / s Marketization.

Black Earth, White Bread

A Technopolitical History of Russian Agriculture and Food

Like all facets of daily life, the food that Russian farms grew and citizens ate—or, in some years, didn't eat—underwent radical shifts in the century between the Bolshevik Revolution and Putin's presidency. The modernization of agriculture during this time is usually understood in terms of advances in farming methods. Susanne A. Wengle's important interdisciplinary history of Russia's agriculture and food systems documents far-reaching changes on farms, along with their effects on ordinary people and for successive political regimes. Wengle argues that we need to focus on the political actors who employed and favored particular agrotechnologies to provide "the good life" for citizens. Each of the large-scale rural reforms was rooted as much in political ambitions as in the need to increase crop and meat yields. Attempts to create the conditions of abundance relied heavily on top-down programs that nearly always had unexpected, and occasionally devastating, outcomes. Bringing together a narrative on governance, production, consumption, nature, and the ensuing vulnerabilities of the agri-food system, Wengle reveals the intended and unintended consequences of Russian agricultural policies since 1917. Ultimately, Black Earth, White Bread is a call for attention to states' reliance on specific technologies to illuminate transformations in food systems everywhere.

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