

# The Question of the Modernization of Turkey's Rural Areas: Village Institutes

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the Village Institutes -that is one of the most important initiatives carried out in rural areas of Turkey-, the village educators and village teachers who have been educated in these institutions, the quality of the education they received, their duties, and the contributions they made in the villages in a detailed manner. The starting point of this study is basically the fact that the notion of village educators and village teachers are often confused with each other in the literature. This study aims to bring an end to this confusion and to examine the village institutes initiative from a more comprehensive perspective. As a result of this study, it has been revealed that studies conducted without considering the existence of two different village types in rural areas of Turkey would be misleading. In addition, it was stated that the concepts of village educator and village teacher should be accepted and examined in the historical process.

**Keywords:** village Institutes, village teachers, village educators, rural education, rural areas of Turkey

## Introduction

Village Institutes (VIs) is a project established in the rural areas of Turkey, with the aim of modernizing the rural areas with its unique method and system. Although the initial emergence of this project goes back to Ottoman period, its foundation was laid in 1935 by Atatürk's order to establish a research commission to investigate the ways to modernize and improve the conditions of rural areas. With this project, it was planned to educate personnel who would develop and modernize the rural areas.

This study consists of four chapters. In the first chapter, the situation, condition and needs of Turkey's rural areas before 1935 are evaluated by considering the population factor and certain differences that were detected between villages. For this reason, the existence of villages is degraded and accepted as two types. In the second chapter, the research commission and its activities which led to the Village Educators Project and its development are examined. One of the main contributions of this commission was that it revealed the problems, needs and present situation of the villages entirely and offered some solutions. Regardingly, it can be stated that the educator project was planned and implemented based on the report prepared by this commission. In the third chapter, the aims, curriculum, and

teaching methods of the VIs project, which was a follow-up of the village educators project, are assessed. Within this project, the needed personnel who would have spread the new values of the republican regime to the rural areas were raised. In the last chapter, the concepts of village educators and village teachers, which were introduced to the literature with the Vis, are compared.

This research is a qualitative one in nature. The methodology of this research is historical research. The primary sources of the research are composed of documents obtained from the personal archive of İsmail Hakkı Tonguç, who was the architect of the VIs and the general directorate of primary education between 1935-1946. Also, the memoirs of directors and students who worked or studied in these unique institutions are used.

## 1. Background

In this section, the situation, conditions and needs of rural areas of Turkey before 1935 will be examined. First of all, it is important to refer to a situation that seems to be ignored by most researchers. Most of the researchers considered the rural areas of Turkey as a whole and ignored the differences between one village and the other in the entire rural areas. In this study, the authors acknowledge that there are two types of villages in Turkey. The main reason behind such division is that we argue the conditions and needs of these villages vary between each other. In this study, we considered a population of 400 as the limit. The basis of this argument is that the conditions in villages with a population of more than 400 -as being located on busy roads and close to city towns- are more advanced than villages with a population of less than 400 -far from busy roads and city towns, mostly isolated- (Tonguç, 1937g).

**Table 1: Comparison of two-types of villages in the rural areas of Turkey**

	<b>Villages with less than 400 inhabitants</b>	<b>Villages with more than 400 inhabitants</b>
<b>Population</b>	6.836.839	5.564.113
<b>Number of villages</b>	32.357	7.446
<b>Number of school-age children</b>	Approx. 820.000	Approx. 667.000
<b>Number of school-age children attending school</b>	113.000	271.000
<b>Number of school-age children not attending school</b>	707.000	370.000
<b>The number of teachers needed in villages</b>	Approx. 30.000	15.300
<b>The level of interaction among the villages</b>	Low	High
<b>The means of existence</b>	Heavily depends on agriculture	Mostly agriculture and trade

Source: Tonguç, 1937b; Tonguç, ca. 1936a; Tonguç, 1935a; Tonguç, 1935b.

As can be seen from the table, the differences between these villages are obvious. Naturally, the needs of these villages are also different. The fact that these two types of villages are less developed compared to the cities caused these villages to be considered as a whole in the literature. However, the level of development/backwardness of these villages differentiate. It can even be claimed that there are more similarities than differences between the villages with more than 400 inhabitants and cities in comparison with the villages with less than 400 inhabitants.

In villages with more than 400 inhabitants, the number of children attending school is more compared to the villages that have less than 400 inhabitants. Therefore, the government tended to build schools in villages and send teachers to villages with more than 400 inhabitants as they had more school-age children. At that time, the number of children that were at compulsory school-age was assumed to be 10% of the population. This decision of the government increased the literacy rate of these villages (Gönder, 2021b). On the other hand, because the number of children in compulsory school age was lower in villages with fewer than 400 inhabitants, the government's common impression was that the cost of spending for that number of pupils was not worth it owing to financial obstacles. Also, these villages did not have any access to electricity and water. What's more is that, in some of the villages, villagers obtained water only if there would be rain (Tütengil, 1969). In addition, the lack of infrastructure, bad condition of the roads and the distances between these villages made people live in isolation for centuries.

Mahmut Makal, in his work *Our Village* (2019), shared his observations regarding the situation of rural areas: „Most of the villagers did not have shoes. They wore pattens. Very few people wore socks. In winters, they burned not wood, not coal, but dung, if they were lucky to find it. Burning the dung brought along health problems because it attracted mosquitoes from the smell of it. According to Makal, this was one of the reasons why diseases were easily spread and common in the villages and he thought that the death rates of the villagers could be reduced partially by solving the heating issue. However, he stated that children freezing to death was a very common problem in the villages, as most villagers couldn't even find dung to burn. Another observation Makal made was that some villagers did not have animals to plow the land and that people replaced animals and plowed the soil”.

## **2. The Emergence of Village Educators Project and Its Development**

Atatürk established a research commission in 1935 to reveal the conditions, needs of rural areas and the expectations of people living in rural areas. The members elected for the research commission -İsmail Hakkı Tonguç being one of them- visited the villages near Ankara and conducted various research. In the report presented by research commission, the noted details are as follows:

1. Teachers who are raised in the cities and educated in teacher's education schools that are based in the cities, could not adapt to the conditions of villages in the villages they were assigned to, and returned to the cities at the very first opportunity (Sarı & Uz, 2017).
2. The villagers, who had learned how to read and write, other related skills and knowledge in the village schools, had forgotten everything they learned within 4-5 years after leaving school (Gönder, 2021b).
3. Rural people who had done their military duty would have learned how to read and write during their military service. After they would go back to their villages, they would teach those skills to children. They would also teach the facts like how the republic operated without a Sultan, how malaria was transmitted by mosquitoes and so on (Eyübođlu, 1979).

Atatürk and the officials of the Ministry of Education, who reviewed this report, were aware of the fact that they needed to provide education to these 35 thousand villages out of 40 thousand as quickly as possible (Tonguç, ca. 1936b). Each missed minute would be a huge obstacle in the way of Turkey's modernization for them. As a result, they looked for the strategies to train educators at the earliest convenience. They were also influenced by the third deduction of the report about some of the rural men voluntarily helping rural children to teach them how to read and write. Therefore, they decided to educate villagers who have served as corporals or sergeants in the military earlier (Tonguç, 1937h). These people would receive eight months of training and be sent back to their own villages as educators (Sarı & Uz, 2017).

Even though it was not officially mentioned, we think that the Village Educators Project was a temporarily planned project. As mentioned earlier, the selected former corporals or sergeants in rural areas would serve in the villages that had no teachers and provide three years of education until the needed teachers would be educated and sent to these villages. Village educators would teach how to read and write, basic maths and civics lessons to the children and introduce modern techniques to villagers so that they could be more efficient in their agricultural work (Tonguç, ca. 1936c). Given that these villages have been deprived of even the most basic services for centuries, the contribution that educators have made in terms of development of villages is nonignorable.

The Village Educators project was legalized by the law on June 24, 1937 (Aydın, 2018). The important articles of the Law on Village Educators were as follows: „In the first article of the law, it is stated that village educators are responsible of guiding the village people to carry out educational works in villages where the population is insufficient to send teachers there and ensure the efficient maintenance of agricultural affairs (Tonguç, 1937c). In the third article, the conditions for becoming a village educator are clearly stated: the candidates are selected

from those who already know how to read and write, are under forty years old and have served as a sergeant or corporal, are born and raised in a village and have not been convicted in any way (Tonguç, 1937e). In the fourth and fifth articles of the law, it is stated that a zone would be defined from the unification of 8-10 villages where village educators would be located. An Itinerant Head Teacher (IHT) would be sent to each zone. Village educators were given a monthly fee which would not be less than 10 Lira per month from the budget of the Ministry of Education, as well as seeds, saplings, and tools needed for agriculture and animal husbandry from the Ministry of Agriculture" (Tonguç, 1937f).

It is obvious that the educators who received their education in village educator courses and were sent back to their villages to provide education have contributed to the development of villages and the increased the level of education. Sarı and Uz (2017) claim that educators made various contributions in terms of the enlightenment of village people, education of women, increased the literacy rate, and reduced the rural-urban inequality. We believe that Sarı and Uz have exaggerated the role of educators in villages. Considering both the length of education they have received and the education they have given in villages, although they have made various contributions, it is clear that they were not able to carry out any fundamental changes in the villages as was expected by the regime. The project developers and executors were also aware of this fact, and as a precaution, they preferred to send IHTs to villages. IHTs were individuals who had received the initial teacher training, visited villages at regular intervals to supervise educators and helped them with any kind of issues they would have (Erdem, 2008). Thus, it was planned that the training of the educators would continue through IHTs. However, the fact that IHTs were given zones each covering 8-10 villages and that they would constantly travel between these villages made it impossible for them to spare time for educators and the IHTs project could not meet the expected efficiency.

With this project, it was aimed to educate 3000 village educators per year (Tonguç, 1935c). However, after the official start date of this project, it was arranged so that only 2000 village educators could receive training per year (Tonguç, 1940). In a period of 10 years (from 1937 to 1946) 8553 village educators were able to receive education. Although this number is far low from the stated goal, when the number of teachers that received education are considered ever since the Ottoman Empire period, it can be said that these figures are way better compared to both the Ottoman Empire and the republican period. These educators have taught 213,284 students (135,064 were male and 78,220 were female) (Aydin, 2018).

### **3. The Village Institutes**

The VIs project can be considered as a continuation and improved form of the village educators project. Although the village educators project gave positive results, the fact that it did not have the capacity to provide the desired development in the villages paved the way for

the revealing of this project. The aims of VIs are as follows: to raise the education level of village children, to bring the Turkish revolution and republican values to the most remote Turkish villages (Tonguç, 2020) and to develop and modernize rural areas. Tonguç (2020) has argued that 'revival of the village resources' could only be achieved by the villagers. VIs were seen as a tool to create a modern nation rather than adopting a narrow-framed view such as 'a school for each village, a teacher for each school' (Aydın, 2018). The way to create a modern nation is to raise generations that will adopt and defend the revolution, will keep up with the modern world (Tonguç, 2020), adopt Atatürk's reforms (Çınar, 2003), be open to innovations, and are able to use modern machines. It was about raising citizens, bringing a broader perception to their horizons and instilling them with competencies that could change their destiny (Altunya, 2009).

Hasan Ali Yücel explained the reason for the establishment of VIs as follows: „We want to raise people who would bring the revolutions we have made in our social life to the villages. Because the revolution of the Ummah had such a man: imam. We want to replace imam with a man of revolutionary thought in villages. This is how the idea of VIs was born.” (Çınar, 2003).

The draft law for the establishment of VIs was submitted to the Grand National Assembly of Turkey on April 17, 1940 (Aysal, 2005). At the time the law was voted on, there were 426 deputies in the assembly. However, on the voting day, 148 deputies, including Celal Bayar, Fuat Köprülü, and Adnan Menderes, did not come to the parliament and the law numbered 3803 was accepted with a majority of votes on April 17, 1940 (Avcı, 2018). Although these deputies could not have openly opposed this law (Aysal, 2005), they showed their opposition against the establishment of the Institutes by not participating in the voting process. In this respect, it would not be wrong to use the following expression: “VIs were born disabled”.

With VIs, the country was divided into 22 regions and it was planned to establish an institute in each region. The institutes would be built by collective work. Each institute was built with the capacity to accommodate 1000 boarding students and until 1946, 20 institutes (Tonguç, 2020) were established. In the VIs, all the work -except cooking- was done jointly by the people within the institute, regardless of title (Altunya, 2009). In a very short time, VIs became a self-sufficient organization. Almost everything required in the institutes would have been made by the people in the institutes. To give an example, all buildings in the institutes were built by the common efforts of institute teachers, students and villagers. Likewise, meat and dairy products, vegetables, fruits and legumes needed by the Institutes were also obtained from animals, vegetable and fruit gardens or fields that were present within the lands of institutes (Tonguç, 1937i). Students could have been a part of this process and have had a say in the institutes through the collaborative work mentality adapted.

The basic principle of VIs was the principle of education within the work/on the job concept. This principle was based on the method of learning by practising (Karaömerlioğlu,

1998). With this method, the villagers were not only limited with theoretical knowledge, but also were encouraged to apply it in their daily lives. It is known that Tongu worked on this method for many years and even received a special education on this matter (Baykurt, 2019). On the other hand, there was a private democratic culture established in the VIs. Saturday meetings (Saturday meetings were called the Assembly of Institutes in Hasan Gnder's article titled *Initiative to Create Ideal Citizens in Rural Areas of Turkey: Assembly of VIs*) were held once or twice a week with the participation of everyone in the institutes. In these meetings, the current week's work would be evaluated, the next week's work would be planned and those who were successful in their work would be awarded (Gnder, 2021a: 39). The most important feature of these meetings was that everyone would have had the opportunity to criticize each other regardless of their title. Fakir Baykurt (2019) stated that from time to time, students criticized teachers and directors and they took suggestions of students seriously and got back to them without taking advantage of their title. However, there was no room for criticism that would not provide any logical basis. With these meetings, it was aimed to give the students the ability to express themselves and encourage them to speak up in public. Teachers who graduated from the VIs tried to apply and maintain this culture in the villages they were assigned to. Mahmut Makal (2019), a graduate of the VIs, tried to sustain this culture on the days when classes were not held in winter or on Sundays, and he would read books and discuss village issues in these meetings.

With the change of government in 1946, the VIs initiative was undermined. The important principles and values of the Institutes were abandoned and people working in the crucial positions of the Institutes, such as Ismail Hakkı Tongu, Hasan Ali Ycel and Rauf Inan were dismissed. Until 1946, 5542 teachers and 8756 educators received education in these Institutes (Tongu, 2020). In 1954, the ruling Democratic Party abolished all kinds of institutes and schools giving special education for rural areas (Arayıcı, 1999) and with the law numbered 6234 enacted on January 27, 1954, VIs were turned into primary teacher schools (Altunya, 2009).

Reat emsettin Sirer's view on VIs who replaced Hasan Ali Ycel as the Minister of National Education in 1946, revealed the magnitude of this destruction: 'If you raise these children like this, how will we manage this nation? I don't want the horse I ride to be smarter than me' (Tongu, 1984).

#### **4. Comparison of Village Educators and Village Teachers**

Village educator and village teacher, two concepts introduced into our literature by VIs, are sometimes confusable. Although these two terms seem similar to each other, there are plenty of differences between them. In this section, we aim to eliminate this confusion by comparing these two terms below.

**Table 2: Comparison of the Village Educator and the Village Teacher**

	Village Educator	Village Teacher
<b>The duration of education</b>	6-8 months	5 years
<b>Required criteria for the selection</b>	Chosen from among literate villagers who completed their military service as sergeants or corporals.	Selected through the examination from among healthy village children who completed their primary education
<b>Visibility of women</b>	Very low <sup>1</sup>	High
<b>Places of duty after graduation</b>	Their own villages	Their own villages
<b>To what degree have they modernized/contributed to the development of rural areas?</b>	Low <sup>2</sup>	High
<b>Salary</b>	10 liras	20 liras
<b>Qualification of the schools they were assigned to</b>	Assigned to schools giving the three-year primary education	Assigned to schools giving the five-year primary education
<b>Inspection</b>	Itinerant Head Teachers and Primary Education Inspectors	Primary Education Inspectors
<b>Duration of the internship</b>	At least 4 months	1-3 years
<b>Length of service</b>	They can work until the age of 55 <sup>3</sup>	20 years <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> No ordinance or a specific statute was declared or mentioned for the recruitment of female educators in the law of village educators. It was stated that only men who have completed their military service as corporals or sergeants would be recruited. However, in one of the documents we obtained from the personal archive of İsmail Hakkı Tonguç, it has been stated that there were also some female educators and they were 20 individuals in total (Tonguç, ca. 1938). In the two of the articles published about village educators, the number of female educators was stated to be 29 (Erdem, 2008). Due to the fact that no date was specified in the document, we do not know in which year female educators were numbered as 20 in total. Therefore, the number of female educators may also have increased to 29 over time.

<sup>2</sup> If the quality and quantity of the education received by the educators would be assessed, it is obvious that they did not have the necessary skills to make radical changes in the rural areas. However, opening schools where there were no schools and teachers before, teaching how to read and write... Surely, they had partially contributed to the development of rural areas.

<sup>3</sup> As the educators were chosen from among the villagers who were younger than 40 years old and who had completed their military service as corporals or sergeants, no compulsory service was specified for them. It had been determined up to what age such educators could serve, based on the efficiency that could be acquired from them. Moreover, it has been stated that educators who have worked more than 10 years were to be paid a retirement bonus equal to their two-year salary.

<sup>4</sup> One of the reasons why rural areas could not develop in the past years was that the teachers, who were educated in the teacher schools in the cities and were sent to villages, returned to the cities at the first opportunity because they could not keep up with the conditions of rural areas. Taking lessons from this situation, İsmail Hakkı Tonguç, the founder of the VIs, made students of VIs to sign a contract stating that the graduates of VIs would serve in the villages for 20 years. Since these people were born and raised in villages, this compulsory service was normal for them and the aim was to contribute to the development of the rural areas this way.

<b>The nature of the education they receive/ give</b>	They taught how to read and write, maths and social studies. In addition, they showed the modern agricultural techniques at an introductory level.	They taught cultural and technical courses, they'd be specialized in a profession of their choice at the VIs and they professionally would carry out that profession in the villages. They would also teach modern agricultural techniques at the professional level.
<b>Number of graduates</b>	8.765 <sup>5</sup>	Approx. 16.400 <sup>6</sup>
<b>The approach of peasants</b>	Positive, generally respected	Biassed, often negative <sup>7</sup>
<b>The goals</b>	To increase the literacy-rate	To modernize villages in every aspect
<b>To what method they've taken their training/ education</b>	On the job-training	On the job-training
<b>To what degree they've become the needed person for the modernization of rural areas</b>	Low	High

Source: Aysal, 2005; Tonguç, 1937h; Özçelik, 2009; Tonguç, 1937j; Tonguç, 1937k; Tonguç, 1937a; Tonguç, 1937d; Tonguç, 1936; Altunya, 2009; Erdem, 2008; Tonguç, 1944; Oktay, 2009; Kapluhan, 2012; Makal, 2019; Tonguç, 1937i.

As can be seen from Table 2, there are serious differences between village educators and the village teachers in terms of the duration and quality of the education they received. It is obvious that the educators could not have carried out any radical changes in the rural areas. From this point of view, it can be claimed that the village educators project was a temporary one as individuals that played a role in that project were educated to provide education to the villages until teachers would receive their education and were sent to these villages. By this way, educators opened schools and gave education at primary level in locations where there have been no schools or teachers for centuries. Also, the republican regime's ideas and values were to be promoted among villagers this way. It can be said that educators have contributed to the increase of literacy rate in the rural areas. However, it would be misleading to consider that the educator project achieved the desired revolution in the villages. For this reason, a better version of educators, rural teachers were raised. With village teachers, it was aimed to

<sup>5</sup> For İsmail Hakkı Tonguç (2020), the number of educators graduated was 8765. On the other hand, Kapluhan (2012) stated that this number was 8756. However, since Tonguç was the founder of this initiative, his number was taken as reference.

<sup>6</sup> Researchers have a disagreement on the number of teachers graduated from VIs. According to Avcı (2018), as of 1954, the number was 17,341 (1308 of them were female); and for Kapluhan (2012), 16,400. On the other hand, although Altunya and Avcı agreed on the total number of teachers, they disagreed on the number of female teachers. According to Altunya (2009), 1398 of them were female teachers.

<sup>7</sup> Because of the influence and propaganda of the landlords and imams.

modernize villages in every aspect. When the quality of the education received by the village teachers was to be assessed, it can be said that they had the necessary qualifications to develop and modernize the villages.

When village educators and village teachers are evaluated in terms of women in this project, it can be said that one of the most crucial criteria of modernization, the presence of women was at a very low level. It is obvious that this situation prevented women from taking active roles in the development of villages and affected the number of school-age girls being sent to school in a negative way. Due to the patriarchal structure of the rural environment, families were not in favour of educating their daughters. We believe that the lack of women educators could have also had an impact on the number of female students in these villages. Families might have been inclined to not send their girls to school as there would be only male teachers there. As for the gender distribution of the students receiving education, the number of female students was nearly half of the male students. This data justifies our argument and proves our claim. On the other hand, there is also a prominent side of admission of men who have completed their military service as temporary educators and sending them to work in their own villages. These people were respected people in their villages and had a significant sphere of influence. With this project, Tonguç wanted to benefit from their power and influence these villages. The struggles experienced by village teachers who were admitted to the institute at a very young age, studied for many years and had no influence and gathered no respect in the villages after all, are explicit. Especially since 1946, most of the village teachers were declared *persona non grata* in the villages due to communist propaganda and were exposed to various attacks (Avci, 2018; Aysal, 2005; Karaömerlioğlu, 1998). However, the prestige and influence of the educators in the village continued at a certain level and they could not be accused of being communists because of their military background.

It is obvious that with the village educators, it was aimed to provide education to the villages that had no schools and teachers at the earliest convenience. For this reason, the reason that they could not fit the standards of teachers considering the length and quality of the education they received is understandable. Although the goal was to make them continue to receive their education through IHTs after they had started working in villages, it is open to debate to what extent it was achieved. On the other hand, the fact that the village teachers received 5 years of education and 1-3 years of training reveals that they had the required skills to modernize and develop rural areas. Indeed, village teachers have made great contributions to the development and modernization of villages in a positive manner. These contributions were also reflected in the related educational and economic data.

Finally, the duration and type of education given by the village educators and the village teachers at the schools they would have been assigned after successfully completing their education and training were different. Village educators would have been assigned to schools

and given three-year primary education. This situation led to the emergence of another problem. Students who completed primary school that provided three-year education in their village, could complete the fourth and fifth grades at the regional school near their village if they desired (and their families allowed them to do so). These regional schools were boarding schools. However, because of the distance and patriarchal structure, families did not send their children (for boys, to help them on the farms; and girls, due to the patriarchal structure of the society). Due to this system, most of the rural children received education by educators could not continue their education. Although schools were built and villages were provided with teachers -which was deficient for centuries- through the educator project, the presence of schools and educators in these villages could not make any remarkable contribution to the modernization of the villages.

## **Conclusion**

We revealed and accepted the existence of two types of villages in rural areas of Turkey and conducted and evaluated the research in this context. This has shown us that it is misleading to evaluate rural areas as a whole. We determined that the characteristics, location (distance from cities), income level, familiarity with new values, education and cultural level and health opportunities of these two village types differ from each other. In the face of this situation, we have revealed that the results of studies evaluating rural areas with a single village type will be misleading and that studies to be conducted on rural areas in Turkey should accept the existence of two village types differing from each other and be carried out accordingly.

It is obvious that village teachers have the necessary equipment and competence to modernize and develop rural areas. Their curriculum was prepared, and village teachers were trained accordingly. With the agricultural courses, village teachers learned advanced agricultural techniques and they could teach them to village children and their parents to increase their productivity and make smooth transition from the middle-age agricultural tools to modern agricultural ones. The technical courses given in the institutes enabled the formation and expansion of different occupational groups such as health, construction, blacksmithing, carpentry, beekeeping in the villages. It can be said that the curriculum in VIs prepared rural teachers to modernize rural areas and contribute positively to the development of economic life in rural areas. It can be seen that the contribution of village teachers to the rural areas is more versatile than village educators. Village teachers not only increased the educational level of the villages they worked at, but also made various efforts to modernize them in every aspect.

It is a misfortune that this initiative was undermined in 1946. However, it still managed to educate approximately 20 thousand teachers and educators in a very short time. The conditions of the period and the conflict of this initiative with the benefits of the landlords can

be counted as the main factors that led to the undermining of this initiative. Those actors also did a great effort to prevent the activities to be run by rural teachers. Therefore, these well-raised village teachers could hardly make any changes to improve the conditions of villages. As they were seen as 'communists', rural people mostly refused and undermined their efforts and activities.

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