INTRODUCTION

RESOURCES AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Enterprise Land. Household Land. Water. Moral Authority. Identity.

Resources are at the center of processes of social change. While this is true of any society in any given historical period, it is particularly relevant in the case of postsocialist Eurasia—including Ukraine—where reforms that amounted to nothing less than a radical transformation of social, political and economic life, took place not once, but twice in the last century: with the establishment of socialist states, and then decades later, with their demise and incorporation into the global capitalist economy. At both times, resources were important for anticipating and implementing social change: Centralized ownership and control of resources were crucial to engineering the socialist state; postsocialist reforms reversed many of these public/collective ownership arrangements, although there was no return to pre-Soviet arrangements. On both occasions, it was through the deliberate shifting of resources, through changes in their ownership/control/management and access that social transformation was orchestrated. The mobilization

FIGURE I.1. Ukraine and research area.

of resources is at the center of any reform process. It is through the making of new resources and the unmaking and remaking of others that political economies are changed.

This book is a study of social change explored through the perspective of the revaluation of five resources (identified above in italics). Based on anthropological fieldwork in a rural village I call Brega, Odessa Oblast, Ukraine, the book explores tensions arising from various claims over resources, and the divisions (and sometimes alliances) that resulted from such events.

REFORMING BREGA

The village that is at the heart of this book is in the southernmost part of the country. Ukraine is administratively divided into "oblasti" (provinces), which in turn are subdivided into "raiony"

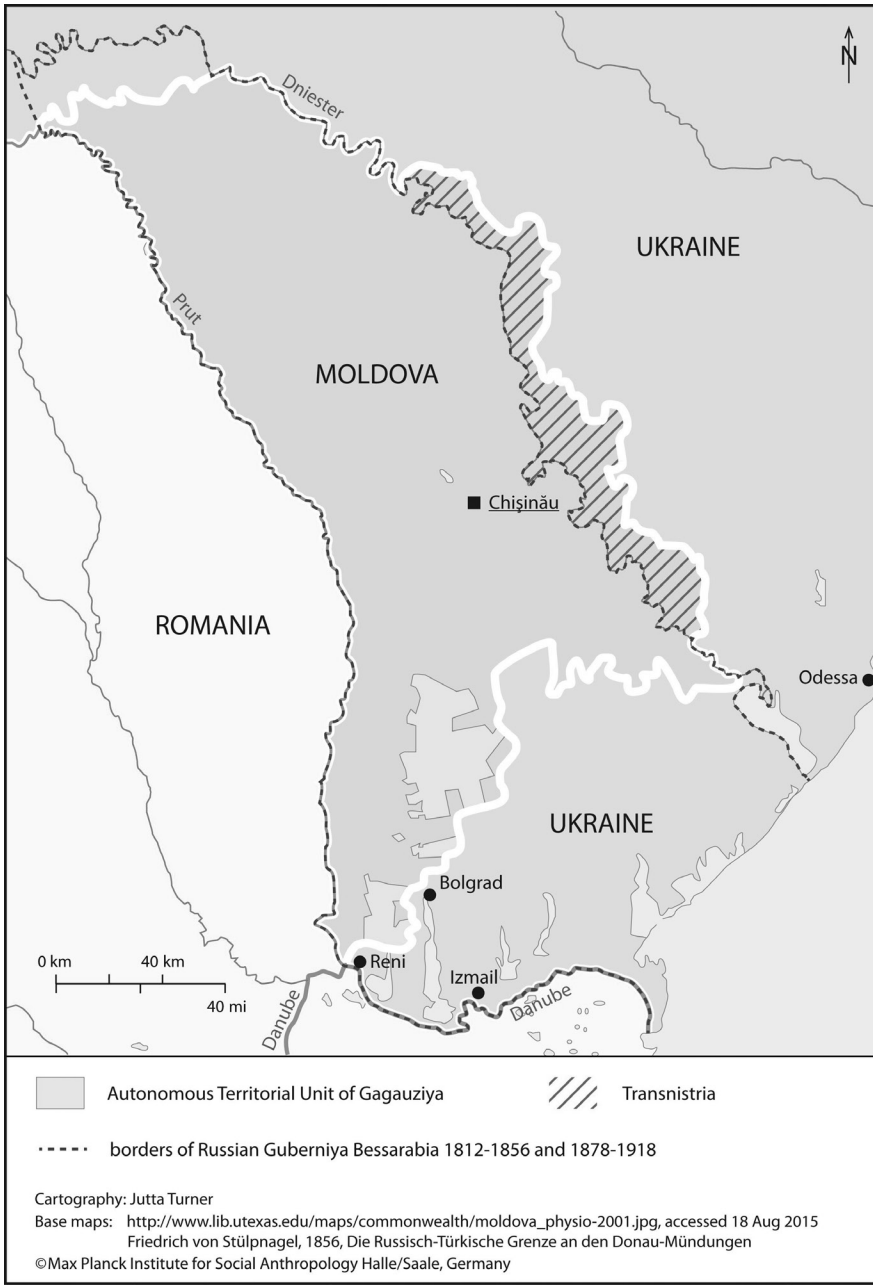

FIGURE I.2. Southern Ukraine and the fieldwork region, located at the very southwestern end of Odessa Oblast.

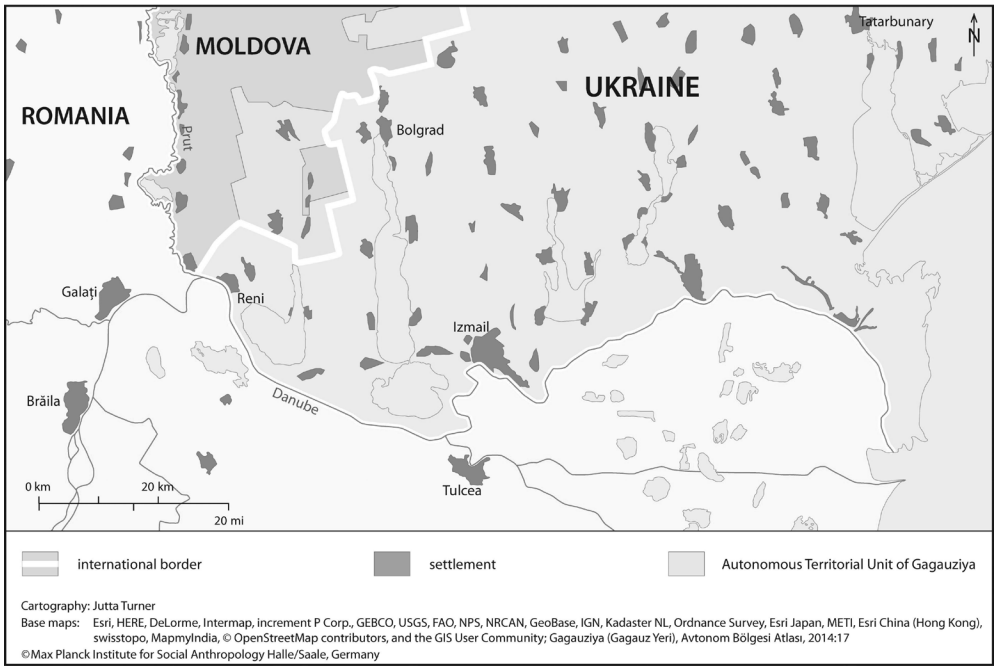

FIGURE I.3. Southwestern Odessa Oblast indicating the towns of Bolgrad, Reni and Izmail and all the settlements in the region.

(districts). For the sake of anonymity, I do not identify the specific administrative district in which Brega lies (see fig. I.1). When I speak of the "region," I am referring to several neighboring districts that constituted the southwesternmost part of the Odessa Oblast (see figs. I.2 and I.3). The rural lands in the territory tucked away at the southwesternmost part of the oblast, nestled between Moldova to the north and west, Romania to the south and the Black Sea to the east, were dominated neither by ethnic Ukrainians nor Russians. Indeed, there was no clear ethnic majority in this region that has always been culturally and linguistically diverse. Instead, it was several of Ukraine's nationally designated "minorities"—Bulgarians, Gagauzi and Moldovans—who predominated in the rural regions of the area, as they have for the past two centuries.

Records show that Brega was first settled in 1812 by 118 Bulgarian families.[1] The majority of Brega's 2,400 inhabitants identified themselves as ethnic Bulgarians (90 percent in 2014).[2] There were also Gagauzi (2 percent) and Moldovans (3 percent), while

the rest claimed to be either Russian or Ukrainian (5 percent).[3] Neighboring villages were also relatively monoethnic—Moldovan, Gagauz or Bulgarian.[4] From the very beginning, their migration was intricately tied to the desire to escape Ottoman rule and settle within the Russian Empire, which offered them sanctuary. It points to a close and complicated relationship with Russia that continued (at least) into the first two decades of the twenty-first century: Bregans claimed their ancestry as ethnic Bulgarian while recognizing the important historical role Russia played in their past and present. It was a relationship evidenced through their bilingual and bicultural practices: Bulgarian was spoken within the village, and Russian was the lingua franca in the region and was used with "outsiders" and with other ethnic groups or in more formal settings. Since Ukrainian independence in 1991, an additional new layer of language skills has been required of the inhabitants. The Ukrainian language featured in all official government documentation (by law). I will say more about this identity in chapter 5. The important point for now is that the strong historical connections to Russia, which were expressed through the everyday linguistic and cultural practices of local inhabitants, gave a distinct flavor to the area. This orientation meant that this southwestern-most part of Odessa Oblast had more in common—at least politically—with Crimea or eastern parts of Ukraine than western areas of the country. At the same time, the region, especially the rural areas, was distinguished from the rest of the country—east and west—on the basis of the ethnic heritage of the inhabitants' cultural connections to present-day Bulgaria or Moldova, while the two nationally dominant ethnicities—Ukrainians and Russians—were minorities.

The particular ethnic and historical characteristics described above were notable distinguishing markers of this region. They were also important in understanding the making of the region's contemporary marginality from the rest of the country—a marginality based on linguistic and ethnic differences, as well as on the basis of divergent histories associated with such a heritage.

Such a marginality has been reinforced in a number of additional ways during the last three decades. Once a thriving economic center of the Soviet Union (Samokhvalov and Samokhvalov 2006), the area, after Ukrainian independence, was struggling

economically, having lost much of the trading that once took place at the busy Soviet ports on the Danube River at both Reni and Izmail, which provided markets for agricultural produce from the region. Within Brega, the disestablishment of the former Soviet collectives led to high unemployment, and the agricultural enterprises that replaced the previous collectives employed only a very small fraction of the original workforce. This had significant impact on the village, as evidenced by the overall decline in population by 20 percent since 2000.[5] The region's economic marginality was reinforced by its peripheral geographic location. It is 300 km from the oblast capital of Odessa, which can only be reached by the one road that connects this southernmost end of the oblast to the provincial capital and the rest of the country. When I last traveled on this road, its condition was so poor, with such deep potholes, that the road was almost impassable by car in certain places. Schlegel (2016, 14–15) notes that in winter the road may be closed for days after heavy snowfall, cutting off the region from the rest of the country. More recent reports indicate that the EU was investing in improving this main artery road between the southwesternmost parts of the oblast and Odessa (de Waal and Jarabik 2018, 9). The borders with Romania (on the Danube River) and Moldova created additional barriers to trade, transportation, and communications.

Thus, the distinguishing features of the region in which Brega lies were in terms of ethnic makeup, geopolitical orientation, and history. Economic hardship may not have been a unique characteristic (since it is common in many regions of the country) but has played a role in adding to the isolation of the region and decline in population. In all ways, the area could be represented as marginal when compared to other parts of Ukraine.

Brega had another characteristic worth highlighting that made it quite different from neighboring villages in the region: Its leaders welcomed the restructuring of the agricultural system, and to this extent Brega was known locally as a "pro-reform" village. Driven by national laws and largely sponsored by western funding,[6] local leaders played a crucial role in how the reforms took shape on the ground (see also Allina-Pisano 2008, 12, 20). The fate of nationally driven and internationally sponsored reforms was ultimately determined locally. Allina-Pisano (2008), in her fascinating book on

property rights in the Black Earth region of Ukraine and Russia, underlines how local state officials were crucial actors in land reform outcomes, their efforts strengthened by state decentralization policies. In the case of Brega, too, it was the local leadership who played the crucial role in shaping how the reforms were received and implemented. Brega officials from the collective farm were positively predisposed to the agricultural reforms and the main protagonists in pursuing reforms locally. Indeed, a former head of the agricultural collective told me that Brega, as the first village in the region to initiate the reforms by privatizing the sheep herd in 1991, was often presented by district officials as an example to other neighboring villages. I will say more about these agricultural reforms in chapter 1.

The village's pro-reform reputation was reinforced by the presence of the British government's development fund—known at the time as the "British Know How Fund"—which was active in Brega before my arrival and in the early years of my fieldwork.[7] Indeed, Brega was first brought to my attention as a possible fieldwork site by the Know How branch in Odessa. My ties to the Know How Fund were informal, through a British anthropologist working for the organization. She kindly introduced me to her Odessa colleagues, who in turn offered assistance by providing transport during my first trip to Ukraine, in order to find a suitable field site. Their help made it possible to visit a large number of villages (almost 50) over considerable distances in a relatively short period of time. On occasions when I had the opportunity to speak to the local officials in the villages I visited, I detected a lack of enthusiasm for my presence. It was only after I modified the way I presented myself, distancing myself from the British agency by expressing explicitly that I had no official affiliation to them, while at the same time playing up my ancestral connections to Bulgaria, that the reactions toward me warmed. Later, I learned that their suspicions of foreigners were grounded in the understandable assumption that "westerners" were there to enforce unpopular reforms. Not wishing to impose myself on a community that would be uncomfortable with my presence meant that I eventually settled in Brega (rather than another site closer to Odessa as I had originally planned), where I was welcomed by the proreform leadership.

When I speak of the reform process, I recognize that it is an umbrella term that incorporated a wide range of nationally-driven processes/policies, implicated a large number of resources and vast sets of institutions across different administrative levels. In the case of Ukraine, reforms were financially sponsored by foreign donors, the World Bank and EU,[8] and practically all dimensions of social life have been subject to reorganization at one time or another in the last three decades. Targets of reform include: the judicial system, the tax system, the banking sector, and the decentralization of various public administration institutions. Privatization of a vast range of assets and services—most recently affecting state-owned enterprises, healthcare, education, and pensions—has also been an integral part of the reforms. Such initiatives have gained momentum since the wave of civil protests in 2014, commonly referred to as "Euromaidan," when the country solidified its ties to the west.[9] Reforms have focused on six priority areas, one of which is the agricultural sector.[10] Land privatization, as a cornerstone of reforms across eastern Europe, was particularly important in the case of Ukraine because the country was a key agricultural producer in Soviet times and remained heavily dependent on its wealthy agricultural sector (Wegren 2002, 9). Further, land reforms have had the most direct impact on rural communities. Thus, they are of greatest relevance to this study.

Importantly, the impact of land reforms extended well beyond the immediate effects of the privatization of land and dismantling of agricultural collectives. Far more than the cooperatives and collectives in (other parts of) the former East Europe, in the former Soviet Union, collectives were "total social institutions" (Humphrey 1995, 7; also, Humphrey 1998, 450, 451–52, 487), which did more than just work the land. They provided housing for some of the workers, controlled the utilities, and contributed to the cultural and educational institutions of the village. The dismantling of the sovkhoz and kolkhoz over the course of many years had impact not only on landownership/management arrangements, but also on the related resources under their control—such as livestock, buildings, machinery, and housing. Many of the collectives' original services and utilities were also affected: water, provision of building materials, assistance to the school and kindergarten, library, and so on. While this book does not look at all of these

in detail, it does highlight the disestablishment of the collectives and restructuring of the agricultural sector that went far beyond the material resource of collective land (discussed in chapter 1). The knock-on effect had implications for the resources of household plots and water, both of which are the focus of chapters 2 and 3, respectively. The attention to these material resources of land and water provides a way to explore changing relations within the community: between an emerging elite and ordinary villagers, within and between households, and between neighbors.

Beyond the wide range of material resources affected by the reforms, restructuring has also more indirectly, but just as surely, impacted on other areas of rural life. This was, again, especially true in the case of Ukraine, where in parallel to the reforms, a new nation-building project has also been underway (which has not been the case in many other postsocialist states). The search for a common national unifying identity, combined with the turning away from a secular socialist ideology, has put religion in the spotlight. The renovation and reopening of the village church, and the return of a Russian Orthodox priest after a thirty-year absence, resulted in growing tensions between the priest and the mayor as they and their respective institutions and followers—church and the village council—competed for local moral authority (the subject of chapter 4). At the same time, the unraveling of the USSR and foundation of a new independent Ukraine has led to a reappraisal of the position of ethnic minorities in the country, another indirect effect of the reforms on the local community (chapter 5). In both instances, we have nonmaterial resources—moral authority and identity—also as sites of contestation. I will say more about these, as well as the material resources of land and water below, and in the chapters that follow.

CONCEPTUALIZING RESOURCES

The all-encompassing nature of the reforms in Brega (and indeed across the country and throughout the former Eurasian landmass) turns our attention to the theme of social change. Postsocialism and privatization have both featured prominently as analytical frameworks for understanding social change in the former socialist world. They provide two ways in which anthropologists and other social scientists have conceptualized transformation in such