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AGRARIAN REFORM IN COUNTRIES OF EASTERN EUROPE

by E. Varga*

The agrarian reform carried out this year in a number of liberated countries of Eastern Europe is an event of paramount social and political importance. It implies the abolition of the feudal survivals which persisted from the medieval times right down to our day and which laid their impress upon every phase of social life. Agrarian reform, by unpinning the firmest and the most solid prop of reaction, clears the way for a really democratic social system in the countries which hitherto had practically no democratic forms of political life.

That the agrarian reform is intimately connected with the victory of the democratic forces of the liberated nations is in the nature of things. The big landed estates which the reform abolishes were a heritage from feudalism with its naked domination of the landed nobility over all other classes of society and its system of overlordship and vassalage which denied all rights to the common people. A monopoly of landlordism arose and for many centuries was maintained, thanks to the political dominion which the landed aristocracy exercised in society and on the government.

LANDLORDISM-BULWARK OF EUROPEAN REACTION

Ten centuries ago when the population of Europe was still small, the landowning class kept the labourer forcibly tied to the soil. It was not land which was valued but the men who cultivated it. In references to transfers of land in the records of the period boundaries are indicated only very roughly: from the river to the hill. But, on the other hand, a detailed enumeration is given of every peasant and artisan tied to the estate and his particular skill; the kind of work he is capable of performing and the yearly services he is bound to render to his master are specified at length. Of land there was enough and to spare. But, in order that the peasant might not throw off the yoke of the landlord and live independently on his own plot, all the land was proclaimed to be the property of the landed nobility. **Nulle terre sans seigneur**-no land without its lord-was a fundamental precept of feudal law.

Not only was the peasant serf obliged with his primitive implements to till the fields of the landlord; he had also to cede to him and to the church a substantial part of the crop he gathered from his own land. The feudal social system rested on personal servitude and on the personal attachment of the peasant to the soil. The peasant was, as it were, an appurtenance of the land, a part and parcel of it.

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With the growth of exchange and the rise of capitalism the relationship of the feudal superstructure came into contradiction with the economic foundation of society. The feudal yoke became intolerable to the peasant. As long as the product taken from him was directly consumed by the landlord and his retainers, the feudal exploitation was confined within comparatively narrow economic limits. There would have been no sense in the landowner exacting from the peasant more than he could consume. But these bounds fell away as soon as it became possible to convert agricultural produce into a commodity. The landlord began to extort from the peasant an ever larger portion of the product of his labour. The plight of serfs grew worse and worse. It is appropriate to recall that it was it was worst of all in Poland. **Polonia infernum rusticorum** (Poland is a hell for peasants)-it used to be said five centuries ago. In the unbroken series of peasant revolts which mark European history from the XIII to the XIX century peasants strove to break their shackles.

Time and again revolts were brutally repressed. They did, however, undermine the foundations of the feudal rule and paved the way for victory of the bourgeois revolution. As capitalist relationships grew and spread, the attachment of the labourer to the soil became a fetter on the development of productive forces and feudal dependence of the peasant on the landlord disappeared in one country after another.

But it was only where the formal abolition of the feudal system was accompanied by a break up of the big estates that it signified economic and political emancipation of the peasantry. This, for instance, was the result of the French Revolution at the end of the XVIII century. Where, however, the abolition of feudalism was not accompanied by the disappearance of landlordism, there the political power remained in the hands of the landowners. Such was the case in Italy, Prussia, Poland, Hungary, Rumania and Tsarist Russia. The landed nobility, together with financial oligarchs-with whom they were associated-continued to direct the home and foreign policies of these countries. It was the landed nobility that furnished the court dignitaries, ministers of the state, generals and heads of the government service. In the countryside, the local officials, **gendarmerie** and schools served the interests of landlords. All who represented the authority of the state over the people were dependent upon landowners or were intimately connected with them.

In Prussia, **Gutsbezirke** embracing all "free" labourers on every large estate, survived down to the present century. In these communities the right of administration, judgement and punishment, was vested in the lord. He was the judge in cases to which he himself was a party. It goes without saying that, under the condition of affairs in which all power and all authority belonged to big landowners, democratic rights, as far as the common people were concerned, were purely nominal. In such countries parliamentary franchise, for instance, as far as the numerous rural population was concerned,

was largely a farce. The ballot might be "secret" but peasants and agricultural labourers were obliged to vote as the landlords ordered them to.

Even in England, the traditional land of bourgeois democracy, landowners, who are closely interlinked with the big bourgeoisie, have retained considerable political influence even in our day. It was only a hundred years ago that Gladstone said, "The House of Commons is the House of Landlords." And Haxey, in his highly interesting book "The Tory MP" published in 1939 convincingly proves that the Conservative Party is dominated by a small number of families belonging to the upper landed aristocracy. A large proportion of the Conservative members of Parliament and ministers in Conservative cabinets belong to these families. In his pamphlet, "The personnel of the English cabinet from 1801 to 1924", Professor Laski shows that, in the period 1906-1916, out of fifty-one cabinet ministers twenty-five were Peers. The House of Lords is likewise controlled by the landed aristocracy.

The Conservative defeat in the recent parliamentary elections testifies-as more sober-minded Conservative observers themselves admit-that the people are no longer willing to have so large a political influence remain in the hands of a small circle whose conditions of life totally differ from those of the broad mass of the working people and who are remote from their daily cares and interests.

England, we know, is a country which first entered upon the path of industrial development. Agriculture in that country plays a minor role. Different is the position of economically and politically backward countries. There agriculture is the means of subsistence for an overwhelming majority of the population. It is, therefore, not surprising that in these countries big landowners dominated the social and political life. They were the bulwark of reaction, politically, socially and culturally.

AGRARIAN REFORM BETWEEN THE TWO WARS

It is not fortuitous that the Hitler bloc in Europe consisted almost exclusively of countries where large land-ownership prevailed. Everywhere fascist parties had intimate ties with big landed proprietors. Mussolini's Fascist Party began its career of brutal violence and terrorism by destroying the agricultural labourers' organizations to gratify the **latifundists** of northern Italy. In Germany the Prussian **junkers** played a big part in paving the way for the Hitler regime and for its criminal and piratical war. We need only recall that Oldenburg Januschau, one of the leaders of the **junker** caste, was directly instrumental in raising Hitler to power by scaring the senile Hindenburg with the assertion that Schleicher was preparing to strike a blow at the Prussian landowners. Spanish fascism, which still survives, rests on the support of reactionary big landowners.

In a word, in all European countries reaction in all its manifestations has the full support of big landowners whom, in its turn, it serves as a reliable

defence.

It is not surprising under these circumstances that even after the feudal servitude of the peasant was abolished agrarian reform remained one of Europe's major political problems. Working peasants, who suffered from an insufficiency or total lack of land of their own, never ceased to demand the break-up of big estates. During World War I political leaders in a number of countries promised peasants far-reaching agrarian reforms. But, as often before in history, the landlords deceived the peasants. Only in a few countries where landlords belonged to an alien nationality, as for example in Transylvania, (the Magyars) and in Czechoslovakia (the Germans) was any large proportion of big estates divided up. In a vast majority of cases, however, agrarian reforms undertaken after World War I left the power of big landowners untouched.

Official data show that in Germany, for instance, during the two decades between the two world wars, 79,345 new peasant farms were created and that these received a total of only 264,000 hectares of land. In addition, another 293,000 hectares were allotted for the enlargement of 172,000 existing peasant farms. However, not all the land turned over to peasants was taken from big proprietors, A certain portion was made available by draining marshes and ploughing up waste lands, while some land was assigned from the state domain. The land cut off from big private estates totalled approximately 1,000,000 hectares. Inasmuch as in 1933 big estates in Germany-those over two hundred hectares-represented a total area of 15,800,000 hectares, we see that, in these two decades, only 6% of the land of big estates was divided up. At such a rate of progress it would require 350 years for the abolition of big estates, quite apart from the fact that peasants were constantly losing a part of their land to landlords and banks.

Not very much faster was the pace of agrarian reform in Poland. According to official data (**Statistical Year Book of Poland, 1938**) relating to Poland in her post-Versailles borders, that is, with the inclusion of the Ukrainian, Belorussian and Lithuanian territories seized by the Polish magnates in the period 1918-1937, only 2,500,000 hectares were divided up out of a total of 25,600,000 hectares (exclusive of forests, etc.). As late as 1931, roughly 11,000,000 hectares-43% of the total land-was still in the hands of the landlords who owned over one hundred hectares each. At this rate it would have required about eighty years to abolish big estates.

Even more lamentable was the fate of agrarian reform in Hungary. Nominally, it is true, over 1,000,000 holds (one hold equals 1.07 acres) were divided up. But nearly one-half of this area fell to the share not of the working peasants but officials, clergymen, school teachers, **gendarmes** and even landlords. The situation was analogous in Rumania.

Furthermore, the agrarian measures undertaken after World War I suffered from this serious defect that, even when peasants did receive land,

conditions were such that they were unable to retain possession of it. The peasant had to pay a high price for the land and heavy taxes to boot. Nobody took the trouble to see that he was supplied with the necessary implements for the cultivation of his land. The manner of distribution favoured the landlord who retained the most fertile and the best located parts of his land, as well as his machines and animals. The purchase price was very high and the terms were so onerous that peasants often refused to take plots when they were offered them. Those who received land were forced to run into debt to cultivate it; they fell into the clutches of usurers and quite often were soon parted from the land they had newly acquired.

We need only cite the case of Germany. In that country 4,060 parcels of land were sold under the hammer in 1935 and 4,510 in 1934. With the exception of a few dozen or so these were all farms of small and medium peasants. In addition, in the period between the two world wars, over thirty thousand peasant allotments were annually sold "voluntarily" (not under duress). But, economically speaking, in a majority of cases these were forced sales because, having fallen into debt, peasants were unable to retain their land.

RADICAL LAND MEASURES OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENTS

Quite different are the conditions under which agrarian reforms are being carried out today, after World War II, in countries where popular democracy prevails—in Poland, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia. In the first place, in these countries—for the first time in their history—there are governments capable of protecting, and willing to protect, the interests of the people. After World War I, even where formal democratic principles of one kind or another and universal suffrage were proclaimed, the government remained a government of landlords and bankers. Today the democratic governments of these countries represent the broadest sections of the population: peasants, workers, intellectuals, artisans, merchants and manufacturers. This swing towards democracy lays its impress on agrarian reforms.

Agrarian reforms today are all-embracing. In contradistinction to their earlier reforms, when only a very small portion of the estates was alienated, today, all land belonging to big proprietors, is being distributed among working peasants.

The present agrarian reforms are being carried out in the interests of the peasantry as a whole. That is why a sharp distinction is drawn between the land of the landlords and the land of peasants. The land of the peasant, even if it is more than he and his family can cultivate, remains in his possession, while the land of the landlord, even if it is no larger in area, is alienated.

In carrying out agrarian reform the behaviour, during the period of the German occupation, of those whom it concerns is taken into account. The land of large proprietors who were guilty of treason, collaboration with the Nazis to

the detriment of the people is confiscated without compensation. Large proprietors who took part in the fight for liberation and who have definite services to their credit, retain a part of their estates (in Hungary, for example, three hundred holds). In the division of land privileges over others are granted to agricultural labourers and small peasants who distinguished themselves in the fight for liberation from the Germans.

Agrarian reform is being carried out in the interests of peasants-not landlords, as was the case after World War I. Hence, the compensation paid to landlords is not calculated at prices artificially boosted by big monopoly proprietors, but at such as are within the means of the new owners-the working peasants. This means that the peasant is in a far better position to cultivate the land he receives under the present agrarian reform. Payments for the land are incomparably smaller than were those after World War I when the government paid landlords an excessively high compensation and transferred the whole burden to the shoulders of peasants who received the land. Today, not only does the peasant pay the state a much lower price for the land but the payments fall due not immediately upon receipt of land but only after a definite period when he has had time to get his husbandry going.

Democratic governments are also pursuing a radically different policy in regard to supplying peasants with the means of production. This is no longer regarded as a private affair of the individual peasant but as one of the tasks of the state. Many animals and machines and other means of production were destroyed during the war and occupation. Some types of machines are not adapted for use on small farms. The government is arranging for the manufacture of agricultural machines, farm implements and other means of production for the peasants and is also seeing to it that the available means of production are put to the best use. It also encourages the formation of peasant co-operative associations for the sale of the produce and for the purchase of urban manufactures with the object of precluding or restricting profiteering by middlemen. The government makes it its business to see that cheap credit is granted to peasants receiving new land in order to save them from falling into the hands of usurers. In a word, the government is doing its utmost to promote the prosperity of peasants not only by allotting them land but by every other means at its disposal as befits a government of, by and for the people.

IN HUNGARY

Agrarian reform has radically changed the aspect of a number of East-European countries. The status of the peasant has fundamentally changed. In Hungary, for instance, before the reform 184 proprietors owned 962,000 holds of land, 869 owned 1,360,000 holds, 3,876 owned 1,530,000 holds. Today there are only 13 large farms of about three hundred holds each; they belong to people who have rendered special services in the fight against the Nazis and their Hungarian underlings. In all, some four million holds of landlord properties have been confiscated with or without compensation.

Of the 661,000 persons who needed land, 504,056 have already received allotments, including 177,790 agricultural labourers, 75,137 farmhands, 33,280 dwarf peasants 22,934 small peasants and 15,165 rural artisans. The new farms average from 4.5 to 5.5 holds which is sufficient to maintain a peasant family of four to five persons. As a result of the reform the medium farmer now predominates in the Hungarian countryside: in the place of a few thousand big feudal lords the land is now owned by hundreds of thousands of peasants.

IN POLAND

In Poland more than 150,000 families of formerly landless peasants and farmhands will this year be sowing their own land, not of their masters. Over 200,000 small farms have now been considerably enlarged. In all, about 2,000,000 persons counting members of families have received land as a result of the reform.

RESISTANCE TO BREAK-UP OF JUNKER ESTATES

Agrarian reform in Germany is a special question. The decision of the Berlin Tripartite Conference relating to the economic principles to be applied to Germany states that at the earliest practicable date German economy shall be decentralized for the purpose of eliminating the present excessive concentration of cartels, syndicates, trusts and other monopolistic arrangements.

After the monopolistic organizations the big estates are, without doubt, politically the most influential concentrations of economic power in Germany.

The aim set by the United Nations of completely eradicating fascism and Nazism calls for the destruction of the economic foundations of fascist barbarism, and one of the most important of these is the **junker** estates. In the territories which have passed to the Polish Republic big German **junker** estates are being abolished. But in territories remaining to Germany they represent a big and dangerous reactionary force, the destruction of which is one of the essential conditions for the future democratization of Germany. Together with the monopolistic financial oligarchy the **junker** landlords were real masters of Hitler Germany. They have always been protagonists of predatory German aggression and the main prop of misanthropic chauvinistic ideology. Big feudal estates were strongholds of German militarism.

It is, therefore, not without reason that democratic anti-fascist elements in Germany are now urging the necessity of agrarian reform for the purpose, on the one hand; of destroying the major economic bulwark of fascism and reaction and, on the other, of satisfying the land needs of peasants and of the Germans repatriated from neighbouring countries. It need only be mentioned that, in the province of Brandenburg, one-third of all arable land is held by big

landlords. Of the 106,768 hectares of arable land in the district of Prenzlau, 71,308 hectares belong to large proprietors. The landlords are sabotaging; in this district, for example, 32% of the arable land remained unsown this year.

There can be no place in the new democratic Germany for feudal landlordism and the **junker** caste which constitute the backbone of Prussian militarism. Agrarian reform is one of the essential conditions for genuine and lasting democratization of the country. At the same time, the abolition of big feudal estates of the German **junkers** will be a serious blow to the forces of reaction all over the world.

Naturally enough, big landowners are not disposed to reconcile themselves to the loss of their age-old rule. True, they constitute too small a minority of the population to start a fight single-handed against the democratic governments of the peoples. But they are not alone. They have the backing of reactionary forces in all countries. They have open and concealed followers in practically every stratum of the population. They have followers among big urban proprietors with whom they are linked by partnership in industrial, commercial and banking firms or by family ties. There are protectors of the landlords' interests in the government service whose officials largely come from big landowning families or are linked with them by material interests. Lastly, the landlords have their agents among the upper strata of the countryside.

Fight against agrarian reform is being waged by every conceivable means. Certain agricultural "experts" allege that the break-up of big estates will result in the decline of agriculture. Agents of landlords try to discourage poor peasants and agricultural labourers from having anything to do with the agrarian reforms by threatening them with vengeance of the landlords in future. Officials who served in the old government administration are trying to delay the realization of the reforms, hoping that a political change will supervene.

BASIS OF EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

Fight against agrarian reform often assumes the form of bitter political struggle. The former Polish Exile "Government", for instance, took up cudgels for the big **latifunda**, fought the Provisional Government and stirred up nationalistic and chauvinistic feeling by fascist demagoguery, assassination of Polish patriots, etc.

On the other hand, in carrying out the agrarian reform millions of peasants and agricultural labourers have been drawn into the political life for the first time. This means that the broad democratic sections of the countries which were hitherto under the sway of landlords are awakening and organizing. Thousands of rural committees were setup to assist democratic governments in carrying out the agrarian reform and to counteract the forces of reaction. Agrarian reform on an all-embracing scale means the final abolition of the age-old rule of the landlords. This is an earnest consolidation of the new

democratic regimes in countries of Eastern and Central Europe in which, even the restricted formal democracy that has long existed in other countries, was hitherto unknown and which were under the naked or barely concealed sway of reaction backed by big landlords.

On the other hand, the satisfaction of millions of peasants' land hunger strikingly indicates the progressive nature of democratic regimes in liberated countries of Eastern Europe. So tangible an achievement of democracy as the abolition of feudal landownership and allotment of land to the broad mass of the peasantry will weigh more in the scales of history than those numerous abstract effusions on the subject of democracy with which a certain section of the foreign Press is filled. As to the accusation of "totalitarianism" sometimes levelled at the popular democratic forces in liberated countries the time is not far off when this charge will only be regarded as an astonishing result of blindness. Agrarian reforms, on the other hand, will always remain an important chapter in the history of European progress and European democracy.

Agrarian reform in a number of European countries is one of the most valuable sequels of World War II in which freedom-loving peoples crushed the fascist enslavers. It is an essential condition for the growth and consolidation of popular democracy in these countries and a major factor in guaranteeing the liberty of and peace among nations.