

## THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AND THE LAND QUESTION

### THE AGRARIAN REVOLUTION IN RUSSIA

(Further Extracts from the Press)

#### THE PEASANTS' CRAVING FOR LAND

The village sage learns from the Apocalypse that in the day of the "general partition of the land" (*tchorny peridyol*) to each *moujik* will be allotted 45 acres of land. But who will make the "partition" which has been the dream of the Russian peasant from time immemorial? For a long while the belief was that the Tsar would do it. The peasants' ideas of politics became a tradition which lasted through centuries, and which survived the most convincing disproof furnished by the events of history. The chief of these rooted ideas was that of the democratic quality of autocracy. The young university students who in the seventies spent their vacation working hard at revolutionary propaganda in the villages were always brought up against this firm belief. When they spoke of the hardships of the peasantry the answer was, "It is true that our lives are hard, but when the Tsar knows of all our sufferings he will take away the land from the nobles and will divide it amongst us." When asked, "And what will become of the nobles?" the reply was, "The Tsar will give them allowances." (The Russian *moujik* is a lover of justice, and even for the wolves he has a special saint who cares for them and indicates to them whose mare they may devour!)

This theory of the democratic character of autocracy, cherished for so long by the people, did not at all correspond with the reality. Alexander III. and Nicolas II. in particular greatly contributed to dissociate in the minds of the peasants democracy and autocracy. Both Emperors at the beginning of their reign in their speeches to the peasants' delegates demolished the popular expectation of the coming of *tchorny peridyol*, and the people were advised to obey the *predvoditely dvorianstva* (marshalls of nobility).

What relation is there between the peasants' craving for land and their real need of it? The investigator of the economic life of the Russian peasantry is confronted at the outset with startling facts. I mention a few, such as may be found in any standard work on Russian economics. At the time of the "emancipation," in 1861, the economic condition of the Russian peasant was bad. The "redemption money," the price he had to pay for the allotment bought from his former *pomieshchik* (landlord), was exorbitant, and, worse still, his allotment was, in most instances, too small for his needs, and it became less adequate as time went on and his family increased. Moreover, the holdings apportioned to the emancipated serfs were almost invariably chosen from the worst parts of the landowner's domain, and each holding generally consisted of small strips or plots scattered throughout the estate, so that cultivation was thereby rendered difficult and pasture land impossible for fear that unavoidable trespass might be followed by lawsuits instituted by the rich and influential neighbour, the landowner. Thus the peasant soon discovered that he had merely exchanged one master for another—the State. Not daring to tax the rich classes, the State built its budget on the taxation of the peasantry, as the following facts will show. In the province of Novgorod during the 'seventies the total yearly income of the peasant population from all sources—that is to say, from agricultural labour and occasional work in town industries—was about 8 million roubles (£800,000) according to the calculations of the local *zemstvos*. After deducting from

this sum 3 million roubles spent by the peasantry on bread to supplement the inadequate produce of their allotments, and a further sum of 3½ millions paid in direct taxation and duties, the residue when divided amongst all the peasantry in the province of Novgorod allowed an average for each household of 12 roubles 65 kopecks for a year's expenditure on salt, clothing, boots, implements, &c., and on these necessities they paid heavily in indirect taxation. In the most fertile region of Russia, the "black earth" region, such heavy taxes were imposed by the State that the peasant, unable to meet them from the produce of his own allotment, was obliged to take over more land from the proprietor, on terms that would stagger a western farmer. "I am quite sure that the taxes on a peasant's allotment amount to more than the income derived from it; therefore an allotment is not so much a possession as a shackle to keep the peasant in the same place in the interests of taxation." These words are not those of an "agitator," but of Count Shuvaloff, a "marshal of nobility" of the province of Petrograd. In the 'seventies the peasantry cultivated more than 140,000,000 *dyecetin* (420,000,000 acres) of land solely to pay the tax imposed by autocracy. Professor Janson at that period demonstrated that the income per *dyecetin* (three acres) was less than the tax imposed on it (Janson, "Opytstatisticheskago izledovania Krestianskikh-nadelakh," pp. 80-81). The State was, indeed, a sort of serf owner, for its chief income was derived from the labour of the peasantry.

In the decade 1883-92, while the increase of the population was 16 per cent. taxation increased 29 per cent. In the following decade, 1893-1902, while the increase of the exhausted population fell to 13 per cent, taxation took an amazing leap, showing an increase of 49 per cent. No wonder that, while in the decade 1871-80 every *dyecetin* of peasant-owned land owed 19 per cent in arrears to the State, this debt had increased to 24 per cent. in 1881-90, and to 54 per cent in the decade 1891-1900. The peasants were reduced to a state of chronic insolvency, and they finally grew apathetic. Unable to pay their direct taxes, they still had to contribute indirectly to the Treasury by the purchase of tea, sugar, matches, kerosene, and the products of the protected industries—iron, manufactured cotton goods, &c. Stolypin's law completed the ruin, for it destroyed the village land community, which had guaranteed at any rate a bare existence to millions of the village population who by the operation of this law became a landless proletariat. The same law strained still more the relations between the poor peasants and those who were somewhat better off.

The Russian peasantry have long lost their faith in a democratic Tsar who will organise a *tchorny peridyol* of the land; therefore they hailed the revolution with joy and hope, as they saw in it the coming fulfilment of their long-cherished dream. When the news reached the trenches the peasant soldiers deserted by tens of thousands, not because they were unwilling to fight nor because they were weary of the war, but because they fully believed that the moment of *tchorny peridyol* had come, and that it was, therefore, urgently necessary for them to return to take their share in it, for only women were left in the villages and they would not understand anything about the allotments. But when these men discovered that the partition of the land was not to take place immediately, and that the question would be decided by a Constituent Assembly, they returned by tens of thousands to the front. There were certain excesses in the villages; in some cases the

peasants appropriated the landlord's estate, and even burnt his mansion, but most of these deplorable acts occurred where the relations between peasants and landlord were very strained. Generally the peasants decided to await the decision of the Constituent Assembly, and they firmly believe that at last the great moment has come—the time, predicted in the Apocalypse, of the general partition of *all* the land. The following are quotations from recently published Russian newspapers:

"In all districts the peasants carried the resolution that 'the land belongs to the men who work on it.' The land question will be settled by a Constituent Assembly."

"The congress of representatives of the peasants of the province of Toula calls upon all classes to support the Provisional Government and to destroy the German army—that terrible peril to the freedom of Young Russia."

The same congress passed the resolution that "the land belongs to the men who work on it," but that the *tchorny peridyol* must be decided by a Constituent Assembly.

According to the RYETCH, "excesses in the villages around Rostoff, on the Don, happened only in the early days of the revolution, and only in two districts. The sufferers were mostly landowners who had oppressed the peasants. Now the peasants have decided to await the granting by the Assembly of partition of the land."

"In the province of Kharkov the peasantry formed a provisional land rent commission, constituted of representatives of each *volost* (district). There were no disturbances in this province."

"The peasants' congress at Odessa decided to give over temporarily to the peasants all the untilled fields belonging to landlords, awaiting meanwhile the decision of the Constituent Assembly."—*Odesski Lisstok*.

All the resolutions passed by the peasants were of the same character. They do not want anarchy, for anarchy's sake: anarchy and excess do not belong to the character of the Russian people; but the peasant has firmly decided that now, at last, his perpetual craving for land must be satisfied.—*I. W. S. klovisky* (*Diones of the Russkiya Viodomsti*) in the *Manchester Guardian Russian Supplement*, 7th July.

#### THE REVOLUTION ONLY BEGINNING

"What was the main impulse or motive—apart from this question of national self-preservation—that inspired those who took part in the movement?"

"First, of course, the elemental impulse towards national freedom. That was the main motive. But there was another motive, too, which has been supreme in the minds of Russian democrats for generations—the desire of the peasants to obtain possession of the land. Their motto has always been Land and Freedom, not Freedom and Land. They put land first. The peasants, who from about 80 per cent. of the population, have said to the Socialists in the cities: 'You townsmen may be eager for liberty of the Press, liberty of public speech, and so on, but these matters do not concern us. What we want is the land.' Since the Revolution the peasants have come to realise more clearly the advantages that liberty brings, but the land still remains the predominant consideration in their minds. It is a complete misconception to suppose that the chief purpose of the Revolution was to promote the more vigorous prosecution of the war. In so far as its more vigorous prosecution might lead to its speedy ending, there might be something in that theory, but otherwise it is quite mistaken."

Mr. Farbman expressed his own conviction that the Revolution was as yet only at the beginning. "Three forces," he told me, "are clearly manifest: First there is the extremism of the Left, which is trying consciously and deliberately to 'deepen' the Revolution and guide it into the full and universal Social Revolution of its dreams. Then there is the extremism of the Right, now headed by the 'Cadets,' which is trying with equal deliberation and consciousness to 'stop the Revolution' at any price. The third and most important force is that embodied in the

Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Delegates. It is by far the strongest force, and represents the large majority of the revolutionists. Its policy is neither to curb nor to force the Revolution, but, recognising its true tendencies, both social and political, it is endeavouring to realise the fullest social meaning of the Revolution without endangering the political gains that have been won."

Questioned more closely about the "extremism of the Right" of which he spoke, Mr. Farbman ruled out of account the old Black Hundred element, just as he ruled out the noisy and violent anarchism of the Extreme Left. Neither was of great symptomatic interest at this stage.

"The bourgeois elements in the community," he told me, "are content to have accomplished the political result of getting rid of the monarchy, and they have no sympathy with any thoroughgoing social reform, least of all with the nationalisation of the land and its distribution among the peasants."

In reply to my inquiry whether there was any danger of the success of a reactionary movement for the restoration of the ex-Tsar, Mr. Farbman replied that ". . . any agitation of a reactionary type will not have for its motive the restoration of the autocracy, but the prevention of further social changes. With this object in view the counter-revolutionists may do their best to divide opinion in the Army, by appealing to the Cossacks for support against any fundamental changes in the land system. It should not be forgotten that the Cossacks are themselves landowners. Successive Tsars rewarded them with large grants of land. But, as far as the general body of opinion in the country is concerned, it is because the Revolution is a land-reforming movement that it will retain popular support."

In conclusion, Mr. Farbman endorsed the opinion that the Russian people, though living so long under an autocracy, are well prepared for the responsibilities of self-government. The peasants have had an excellent training in the village commune, or "mir," which has enjoyed what to Englishmen would appear an astonishing amount of power in dealing with village affairs and even in disposing of the property of its members. The villagers have been accustomed to attend regularly the meetings of their "mir," to elect its head and to support his authority with perfect loyalty. This system of village self-government should be an excellent foundation on which to base a complete democratic structure for the whole nation.—*Interview with Mr. M. Farbman* (formerly *Manchester Guardian* correspondent in Petrograd) in *Common Sense*, 14th July.

#### MORE RESOLUTIONS

At a conference of the Councils of Soldiers' and Workers' Delegates of Russia, M. Tchernoff, Minister of Agriculture, proposed a resolution based on the following principles:

Land, with its mineral riches, watercourses, and forests, should not be the subject of commercial transactions or sovereign rights. Right to dispose of the same should belong to the whole people, who should administer it through the intermediary of democratic self-governing institutions. The utilisation of the land ought to be assured for the working agricultural population, and to be subject to conditions which would bring about an increase in the means of production and in the development of co-operative social life.—*Edinburgh Evening Dispatch*, 7th July.

The All-Russian Cossack Congress, with one dissentient voice, has adopted the following resolution on the agrarian question:

All lands now belonging to the Cossacks, their patrimony, shall remain in their possession. All lands in Cossack territories, given during the old *régime* to private persons, as well as lands in these territories belonging to the State and the Church, shall be restored to their original owners. Lands in Cossack territories held by peasants shall remain in possession of the present holders.—*Morning Post*, 30th June

## SERFDOM AND SLAVERY

The peasants form up to the present a well-defined separate body, endowed with special privileges and obeying special regulations. This group is the real mainstay of Russia, as Russia, broadly speaking, is a peasant State. Up to 1861 the peasants were serfs in the sense of being "glebæ adscripti"—that is to say, they were bound to remain at their place of abode, and belonged to the proprietors of the land. Broadly speaking, serfdom was a patriarchal form of social structure; the brutality which naturally resulted from the system was in some cases mitigated by the practical interest which kindly landlords took in the welfare of their serfs, by the common religion and race of both, and by the naturally gentle and forbearing nature of the Russian. But of course this deplorable system led to abuses, and to a state of dependence bordering on slavery. It condemned the greater part of the population of Russia to a state of perpetual stagnation and an utter lack of personal freedom. Agriculture was carried on by old and inefficient methods. A part of the land was used in common, and belonged to the peasant community as a whole—the "mir." According to the changes in the number of "souls," this land was constantly subdivided by the community under the direct control of the landlord, who had the right to demand a certain amount of work to be done by the peasants on his own estate in return for their allotment. When serfdom and the right of the landlord to the labour of the peasants was abolished by Alexander II. in 1861, the common land remained at the disposal of the latter, and the landlord received from the State, as compensation for the loss of their labour, money certificates bearing percentages, and subject to redemption. The State in its turn imposed upon the village communities as a whole a tax, arranging for the payment of the percentage to the landlord and the gradual redemption of the money certificate. These certificates have now all been redeemed.

The peasant community, the *mir*, had to fix the amount to be paid by each person. It had the power to exact penalties from those who did not pay their quota at the right time, and even possessed the right to administer corporal punishment or to exile to Siberia any persons so condemned. To a great extent the *mir* thus took over the rights previously exercised by the landlords, and the peasants found themselves economically in a state of even greater dependence than before the abolition of serfdom.—*Asiatic Review*, July, 1917.

## THINGS IMPOSSIBLE UNDER CZARDOM

This evening (29th June) a throng of soldiers' wives assembled at the City Hall of Kieff, and demanded that the Mayor should receive them. The Mayor called a meeting for them in the big council chamber. Women speakers demanded that the Mayor and council should vote a million roubles to pay soldiers' wives pensions at the rate of twenty roubles monthly. The Mayor promised to consider the matter, and adjourned the meeting. The women, refusing to adjourn, seized the Mayor, carried him to the platform, and replaced him in the chair, while others seized the councillors. Thus circumstanced, the Mayor and councillors passed a vote for 800,000 roubles for wives' pensions.—*Daily Telegraph* 2nd July.

A curious picture of life in Petrograd is given, in a message from the special correspondent of the *Journal* in Petrograd. The city, he says, presents an aspect of the most extraordinary prosperity and gives one the impression of being a paradise of the poorer classes.

Recently the heads of industrial concerns were forced to raise wages to such an extent and grant back pay from the beginning of the war that working men have grown rich unexpectedly, and now go in for the most extravagant absurdities. When salaries rise at a bound four or five-fold,

when a man who all his life has been a mere spectator of luxury while earning a pound a week finds himself in possession of four or five pounds on Saturday night his first impulse is to satisfy his long-suppressed desire for abundance and enjoyment. The result is that the Russian workman has plunged into ease, comfort, and pleasure with a frenzy that has deeply disturbed the economic life of the nation. . . . All the shops are crowded, and boots and shoes are in such demand that purchasers are given tickets entitling them to return in a specified date. Ticket holders, afraid of being too late, arrive the evening before and wait on the pavement all night, sleeping on beds and chairs they have brought with them.

Workmen to-day patronise restaurants where they would never have dared show their faces before the war, and 12s. for a lunch seems to them quite a normal price. Yesterday at a railway station, I saw a workman pay his bill. He seemed in nowise surprised at having to give for his meal what would formerly have represented a week's wages. He gave the waiter half a crown, and put in his pocket a piece of black bread he had left over.—*Paris correspondent of the Daily Mail*, 3rd July.

I saw a man in a black skullcap with little beady eyes standing silently by himself. I walked up to him, and found he was a Tartar of Astrakhan. He had been elected by the inhabitants on the north-west shores of the Caspian Sea, where Russians, Tartars, and Kalmucks live together, and he represented them all, for there was no difference now between races and creeds: European and Asiatic were brothers on terms of equality. He told me that they had decided to abolish the private fishing rights on their part of the Caspian Sea. These had been granted to certain favourites of Catherine the Great. The whole of the fishing rights and the grazing ranches of the neighbouring steppes were now to go over to the rural commune and to become public property. . . . The peasants of Kursk had been left very poor after their emancipation from serfdom, and most of the land was in the hands of the great aristocratic families. At once the local peasants' councils fell to discussing the methods of dividing the land among the peasants. In Central Asia the late Government had for years been systematically robbing the Tartars of their summer grazing lands in order artificially to introduce Russian colonists from Europe. Last year, all unknown to Europe, this resulted in a rebellion of the natives of Central Asia and a massacre. Now the local councils of Tartars and Russian colonists have decided to reverse the whole "colonial" policy of the late Government.—*M. Philips Price in the Manchester Guardian*, 23rd July.

The Government crisis is nearly over. The Socialist Ministers, in agreement with the Executive Committee, have presented an ultimatum demanding the immediate fulfilment of the following measures: The proclamation of a republic, the abolition of all class divisions, ranks and badges and medals, the immediate promulgation of four land bills, the fundamental reorganisation of the whole finance and economic system, firm measures against a counter-revolution, and the dismissal of all unfaithful responsible generals.

The resignation of the late Premier, Prince Lvoff, was due to his disagreement with the Socialists on the question of land reform.—*Manchester Guardian*, 23rd July.

The Social Revolutionary M. Rudneff has been elected Mayor of Moscow.

The new Minister of Justice, M. Efremoff, publicly declares that he is resolutely opposed to the Socialist Minister of Agriculture's proposal immediately to prohibit all land transactions. He holds that the question affecting the bases of any land reform can only be decided by the Constituent Assembly.—*Westminster Gazette*, 27th July.