

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AND THE LAND QUESTION

(The following extracts and news reports from Russia are interesting evidence in support of the growing conviction that land hunger and agrarian injustice were the basic causes of the Russian revolution, and that popular opinion seeks to build the new democracy on the economic foundation of free land and free men. In this movement lies great hope for Russia, Europe, and the World.)

Leo Tolstoi's Doctrine.

Even in the time of serfdom the peasants used to say to their masters: "We are yours, but the land is ours," that is, they recognised that however unlawful and cruel is the possession by one man of another, the right of possession of land by him who does not work it is still more unlawful and cruel. It is true that latterly some Russian peasants, imitating the landlords, are beginning to purchase land and trade with it, regarding its possession as lawful, and no longer fearing that it may be taken away from them. But only a few light-minded men, blinded by greed, act thus. The majority, all genuine Russian agriculturists, firmly believe that land cannot, and should not, be the property of those who do not work upon it, and that, though at present the land is taken from the workers by the non-workers, the time will come when it will be taken from those who now possess it, and become, as it should, common property. In holding that such will be the case, and that probably very soon, the Russian peasants are perfectly right. The time has come when the injustice, irrationality, and cruelty of the possession of land by those who do not work upon it have grown as obvious as fifty years ago were the injustice, irrationality, and cruelty of the possession of serfs. Whether it be that other methods of oppression have been abolished or that the population has increased, or that men have become more enlightened, all those who possess land as well as those deprived of it, now clearly see what formerly they did not see—that if a peasant, who has been, and is, working all his life, has not sufficient bread owing to his having no land to sow in, if children and old people have no milk because they have no pasture, if they have not their own piece of wood to repair their rotten hut and warm it, while by their side a non-working landlord, living in his enormous park, feeds puppies with milk, builds pavilions and stables with plate glass windows, breeds sheep, and grows woods and parks upon thousands of acres, spends and eats up in a week as much as would have maintained the neighbouring starving village for a whole year—that such an organisation of life should not be. The injustice, irrationality, and cruelty of such a state of things now forces itself on the eye of everyone, as formerly did that of serfdom. And as soon as men recognise the injustice, irrationality and cruelty of any of their institutions, that institution one way or another inevitably comes to an end. Thus ended serfdom, and thus property in land is bound to cease, and very soon.

—From the Address to the Working People.

Tolstoi's Influence.

On Friday afternoon I suddenly found myself in presence of M. Mouttet and M. Cachet, two old friends and colleagues of mine in the Inter-Parliamentary Committee. It was a joyful surprise to me, not only because they are such excellent fellows, but because they had just arrived from Russia. Both are members of the Socialist Party in the French Chamber, and they had been sent to Russia by

their Government to give greetings to the new Republic, and to put before the new rulers of Russia the views of the French Socialists and of their comrades in the other Allied countries.

I have rarely listened to so fascinating a story as they had to tell of the state of things in the new Russia. It was a revelation and an illumination. May I sum up their account by saying that what I had regarded as the gospel of a single visionary of genius in the person of Tolstoy, represented what was the creed of the majority of the Russian masses?—*T. P. O'Connor in Lloyd's Weekly News, 27th May.*

The Russian people want to attend to their own affairs. What they regard as their affairs are at present purely domestic concerns—and primarily the division of the land. Foreign affairs they do not understand. But they do know that they have been freed and they want to obtain the first fruits of their freedom. Soldiers have left the army because they have heard that the land is being divided up, and they want to be present in their own villages when the division is made there. The agrarian question, with all that it implies, determines everything else in Russia; and it is not because they are Tolstoyans, but because they are shrewd peasants to whom the land means life, liberty, and happiness, that the bulk of the Russian people want a speedy peace. It is the task of the leaders of the Revolution to convince the peasants that their tenure of the land will be uncertain and brief unless a general peace guaranteed by the international democracy can be secured. And the revolutionary leaders are bound therefore to repudiate every aim and claim which may postpone the attainment of such a peace.—*"H.T." in the Christian Commonwealth, 13th June.*

Land and Freedom.

On April 13/16 the leaders of the 7th Army visited the Marie Palace, and petitioned the Minister of Justice, since appointed Minister of War, M. Kerensky, to answer a number of questions which agitate the army. After discussing a number of subjects, M. Kerensky said: "As to the question of the land, I, as far as my own views and convictions go, am all for the watchword, 'Land and Freedom.' The people must get land and freedom in full measure. The Provisional Government in this connection has bound itself with definite obligations. We think it necessary to say that the question of the land and of new forms of land-owning can only be decided by the Constituent Assembly. It will either decide the question itself or will hand it over to the new legislature, but until the calling of the Constituent Assembly no one dares to take upon himself the settlement of this enormous question. Our task as yet is to collect and get ready all material, so that the people's representatives may be able to give their opinion justly and with complete knowledge; but so that no one may, previous to the summoning of the Constituent Assembly, decide the land question in a way not conducive to the good of the people the Provisional Government is promulgating a law to restrict all arrangements for private ownership of land. I assure you that the land question will not be decided without the agreement of the front, and that not a single foot of land will be given to anyone without the sanction of the Constituent Assembly."—*Common Sense, 17th May.*

The Provisional Government's Pledge.

Leaving it to the Constituent Assembly to deal with the question of transferring land to the workers and proceeding with preparatory measures relative thereto, the Provisional Government will take all necessary steps towards ensuring the greatest possible production of the cereals required by the country and towards furthering the systematic utilisation of the soil in the interests of national economy and of the working classes.

Looking forward to the introduction of a series of reforms of the financial system upon a democratic basis, the Provisional Government will devote particular attention to the increasing of direct taxes on the wealthy classes—succession duties, taxes on excessive war profits, a property tax, etc.

Efforts to introduce and develop democratic units of self-government will be continued with all possible speed and assiduity.

The Provisional Government will also make all possible efforts to bring about at the earliest date practicable the calling together of a Constituent Assembly at Petrograd.—*From the declaration of the (re-constituted) Provisional Government, reported in the British Press of 21st May.*

An order has been sent by the Provisional Government to the Central Agrarian Commission and the Chambers of Agriculture throughout Russia instructing them to collect information as to the agrarian needs of the population so that a general agrarian Bill may be drafted for submission to the Constituent Assembly.—*Morning Post, 5th May.*

No more Private Property in Land.

The decisions of the Peasants' Congress, consisting of some 900 delegates from all the governments of Southern Russia, which met at Kherson this week, may be taken as more or less typical of the ideas now prevailing among the rustic inhabitants of these regions.

The Congress declared that, as the Provisional Government had not convened a national conference composed of workmen's, soldiers', and peasants' delegates, the latter must constitute themselves the guardians of the freedom of the representatives of revolutionary Russia. The Government should be supported only so far as it acted in accordance with the advice of the delegates. Russia should be converted into a democratic federated Republic, with a supreme Parliament, but wide territorial and national autonomous rights for the several component regions.

In regard to the land question the Congress, after listening to much oratory, decided that land should not be private property, but should be handed over in accordance with the spirit of Socialism to those labouring upon it. The final decision was that the land question should rest with the Constituent Assembly, which would confer on a separate Ukraine constituent body the right of carrying out arrangements independently. For the present there should be no appropriations of land in order to avoid quarrels and disturbances. All waste lands should be cultivated in order to avert a famine. The partition of the land for this purpose should be in the hands of committees selected by universal and secret suffrage.—*The Times, 17th May.*

The great bulk of the population are peasants whose principal grievance is that they have not sufficient land. When they were emancipated they could not understand why they were not given all the land that had formerly belonged to their masters. They were adscripti glebae, they belonged to the land, hence when they were liberated they imagined that by rights the land should belong to them; instead of that they were only given sufficient land to enable them to maintain themselves, with the idea that they would cultivate for wages the estates of their former masters,

very few of whom now remain proprietors. Moreover, with a view to preventing them from becoming pauperised the land was not made theirs; it was the property of the Mir, a village commune, which was collectively responsible for the taxes. This vicious system has since been abolished, but the seeds of Socialism were thus early sown, and the peasants still believed that the estates of the country gentlemen should by rights have been made over to the Mir, and that their former masters swindled them out of what was their due.—*Outlook, 5th May.*

"Indemnities nearer home."

What is in the Russian peasant's mind? He is a strange peasant if his heart is not in the land, and his attitude towards the war will be largely determined by his interest in the land. His emancipation from serfdom was merely a change from legal to economic duress; the land allotted to him was the refuse of the landlords, and it was burdened with fiscal obligations based on the value of the peasant's labour on the richer soil of his lords. The result was grinding poverty decked out as legal freedom. It is on those richer lands that the peasant's eyes are fixed, and it is not easy to divert them to more distant and less tangible objects. Even the German invasion has affected him little, for it is the Poles and the Lithuanians who have suffered, and not the Russian peasant. Nor has he the motive which made enthusiastic soldiers out of French peasants during the first French Revolution; for their landlords fled to Coblenz and sought to return in the train of Brunswick's army. If Russian landlords had escaped to Hindenberg's headquarters and had been welcomed by the Kaiser, there would be less ambiguity in the Russian peasant's attitude towards the war. As it is, the Russian landlord stayed at home and distracts the peasant's attention.

We have to remember this fact if we are to understand the Russian attitude towards annexations and indemnities. . . . The Russian peasant is not indifferent to indemnities, but he sees them nearer home than on the field of battle; and with his eyes fixed on the domestic means of relieving his economic distress, foreign wars may well appear unwelcome interruptions, diplomacy an irrelevance, and national ambition a superfluity. Nor is the industrialist in Russia and elsewhere, immune from the influence of similar ideas. There are some who are pacifists not for the sake of peace but for the sake of their own special brand of war; international peace appeals to them as an overture to social war, and they oppose the present war because it divides the forces of social revolution and postpones the war of classes. Wars did not cease when they ceased to be fought for religion; and the elimination of nationality, for which the logical Catholic longs, would not make peace between labour and capital.—*The Times Literary Supplement, 24th May.*

A Great Agrarian Distribution.

Sir Paul Vinogradoff, the well-known Russian litterateur, was the lecturer at the Victoria Hall, Sheffield, on 9th June, when he took as his subject "The Russian Bureaucracy and the Revolution." The lecture was one of the series arranged by the Sheffield University War Lectures Committee.—In the course of his address he said: The present revolution was only very superficially a political revolution. It was a social revolution and a social transformation of the different classes. The greatest part in this revolution was being played by the town dwellers, but they were in a hopeless minority. They represented about 15 per cent. of the population. That meant that 85 per cent. of the population were peasants, and in the background it was possible to see in dim outline the stand they would take in this matter. The peasants were going through a process which was bound

to result in an agrarian adjustment. The emancipation of 1861 was incomplete, because there was the historical belief of the peasant that the tillers of the soil were the owners of the soil. At the emancipation the peasants lost a fifth of their holdings. That had a great effect. The distribution of land was extremely unfair. There would be a great agrarian revival, and there was sufficient material to show that the peasants would take as much land as necessary for their needs.—*Sheffield Telegraph*, 11th June.

Lecturing at the Lyceum Club, London, on 14th June, Sir Paul Vinogradoff said: Behind lay the peasantry which was 85 per cent. of the population; and of what was it brooding and thinking? This was the important question. The peasantry was bent on having land, which it traditionally regarded as its own, and the acquisition of which it considered not expropriation but restitution. Clearly a great agrarian distribution would have to be effected. The peasants were strong and stubborn, and would be the steady influence on Russian life. They represented the power of the soil and the fear of God, and were an enormous mass, instinct with the sense of human duty. The best organised provinces of Russia were the peasant provinces of the East. These men were giants, and they would assert themselves.—*Morning Post*, 15th June.

There is much unrest among the peasantry. The news from all parts goes to show that the peasants will not wait for the Constituent Assembly to settle the land question. Everywhere the ownership of land is being taken over by the communal authorities, in most cases without compensation. Where a rent is fixed it is less than nominal. In many cases the proprietors' inventories of horses, ploughs, seed, and the like have also been confiscated and used by the peasants.

In this movement against the landowners there has been no case of murder, but there has been some incendiarism, and in a few cases owners have been mobbed and have escaped only after severe handling. But in the vast majority of cases the confiscations have been carried out without resistance on the one side or brutality on the other.—*The Times*, 25th May.

Russian Land Reformers and the Single Tax.

Realising the seriousness of the agrarian question and its effect upon the general productivity of the land in this critical time, I decided to find out what was the general opinion, as far as it could be ascertained, among the peasants. With this object I visited a number of meetings yesterday which were held all over Moscow and the environs among the soldiers on the land question. I accompanied a Russian friend who gave short addresses to the soldiers on the question of the taxation of land values and the single tax. The soldiers, who were all young peasants, mostly from the south-western governments, listened with wrapt attention. After each address they began discussions, and the general tenour of their remarks was as follows:—

"Taxation of undeveloped land and this theory of the single tax may be very good in the long run, but it won't deal with our cases, which are pressing and will brook no delay. We demand an increase in our land portions and the expropriation of the landlords."

It is clear that the two great conflicting classes in Russia at the present moment, the capitalist middle-classes and the urban proletariat, are prepared to make strong bids for the support of the peasants. The latter offer them the Imperial and private owners' lands for nothing, but under the influence of Marxist Socialism wish to concentrate all land ownership in the State, making the peasants perpetual tenants. The middle-class and the intelligentsia parties have a more moderate plan. They wish to confiscate only

the lands of the late Emperor, the Imperial Family, and the monasteries, buy out the private landlords, and thus create a land reserve which can be handed over either to the rural communes or the Zemstvos to rent out to the peasants at fair rents.—*M. Phillips Price in the Manchester Guardian*, 2nd June, 1917.

The Revolution an Economic Upheaval.

Only two questions interest the peasants—the war and land. As to the war, the opinion of the majority is that it must end quickly. How this is to be brought about the peasant does not know and does not care. "We have shed too much blood; it is time to end the slaughter," they say.

The land question the peasants have settled for themselves. From now onwards landed proprietors' fallow lands are to be ploughed for winter crops by the peasants for their own use. The harvest on these lands is to be gathered by the peasants for their own use. No compensation will be paid the proprietors for dispossession, at least not by the peasants. The question of the ownership of the farm-houses, orchards, and farm buildings is not decided. The majority of the peasants favour taking possession, but they are willing to wait for the decision of the Constituent Assembly if it meets in the autumn; if it is postponed after that the peasants will not wait. They are willing to obey the Constituent Assembly only if its decisions agree with their desires.—*Daily Mail*, 21st June.

As we said lately, the Russian revolution is in its origin largely or preponderatingly economic: there were—and are—immense masses of very poor people in Russia existing on the verge of starvation. The Romanovs were swept away because they had not the energy and imagination to deal with this mighty problem, which is still unsolved. Demanding "liberty" and "democracy," these poor people were really thinking of and demanding bread and the daily necessities of life. People in this country—many of them not only well fed and well housed, but even liberally endowed with considerable fortunes and substantial properties—who go about all day long crying "Democracy, Democracy! Freedom, Freedom! Long live the glorious Revolution!" have not comprehended the causes of the vast change in Russia now beginning. They have not grasped, for instance, the fact that the masses in Russia mean to have the land and a substantial portion of property in the country and towns. We are not here condemning that revolution or trying to set anybody against it in any way: Russia is an Ally, and any such course would be gaucherie and impertinence. We only wish to state facts and to remove the quite erroneous notion in this country that the revolution is one of vague, airy ideas having nothing to do with bread, land, money.

What is stirring in Russia will be stirring in all countries, Entente, neutral, and enemy alike: the masses will want more bread, more land, more money. Merely to give them flowery sentiments about "the Democracies" and to pledge them that "the Autocracies" shall one and all be put away will not be enough. Some countries will meet the demands of the masses and, by wise and bold acts of State before the War and the Settlement are over, will satisfy in a large degree the demands of the poor and less fortunate: in those countries there will not be bloody and confiscatory revolutions. Whereas in those countries where the demands of the masses are not attended to, but merely fobbed off with phrases about Democracy, Democracy, and so on, and where reactionists have their way there will be revolutions, perhaps bloody, and certainly confiscatory. This war is sure to be followed by the greatest turnover in economics and in society that has ever been dreamed of even, and this turnover cannot be confined within the boundaries of the late Russian Empire.—*Saturday Review*, 23rd June.

Where Labour Asserts and Achieves its Demands.

The great revolution in conditions of land tenure in Russia, and the certainty of a partitioning of the great estates among the peasants, may be connected with the surprising developments in industrial conditions and with the great increase in wages as reported below. To the Press correspondents these happenings are referred to as a "sad picture" and the "killing of the goose that lays the golden eggs." But that is always how the spokesmen of the vested interests regard the emancipation of labour.

The Central Strike Committee has ordered a general strike at all the factories in Petrograd for Tuesday, the owners refusing to grant a six-hour day and to give the men and women equal wages.

The Department of Commerce announces that during March the wages of all miners in Russia were increased by 90 per cent., but they are demanding a further increase equivalent to 200 per cent. *Daily Express, 6th June.*

The managers of 140 metallurgical and other factories whose main work is for the defence of the country, having granted all the demands of the workmen, including a six-hour day, the strikes in these factories announced for to-day may be regarded as averted.

The employers in the Donetz district have offered the workers a 50 per cent. increase in wages. The men's representatives have refused the offer.—*Daily Mail, 7th June.*

The Petrograd correspondent of the Associated Press sends a telegram giving a sad picture of present industrial conditions in Russia.

"In many factories," he states, "the demands of the working men for increased wages are actually greater than the entire profits of the factories under the best conditions of production. The working men, through their committees, are in virtual command of the factories, and all business has to be submitted to them for their approval. In the majority of factories wages have already been increased from 100 to 150 per cent.

"Manufacturers find it difficult to borrow money, since the banks are naturally not eager to extend credit to factories which are in control of temporary workmen's committees. An ironical feature of the difficulties is the fact that, though suffering serious loss, owners dare not close their works owing to threats of bodily material vengeance."

The correspondent quotes one case of the directors of a large concern asking the authorities to place them under arrest as a protection against the threats which accompanied their workmen's demands.—*Daily Express, 30th May.*

The workmen have determined to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs by making and securing outrageous demands upon capital. Very many factories are closing altogether rather than continue any longer paying exorbitant wages out of capital. Others are being turned over to the workmen, as in the Moscow district during the revolt of 1905. An eight-hour nominal working day has been established everywhere, not only for hard manual labour, but for the lightest forms of employment of all kinds—for example, bank clerks, shop assistants, and civil servants in Government offices. Strikes are becoming daily occurrences in one or other branch of employment, and it is now the rule to demand not merely outrageous increases of pay, but arrears at the same rates, for the past two and a half years, or since the beginning of the war. Unskilled labour has been getting five hundred pounds sterling, semi-skilled labour over one thousand pounds per annum and there is

no limit to the demands made by and accorded to those engaged upon essential war work. Even the agricultural labourer wants between three and four hundred pounds per annum. The work obtainable at these or any other prices is not of a strenuous nature, and the eight hours nominal day results in an output which before the war would have been produced in three or four hours' honest work. Moreover, the eight hours day is only a transitory stage. In some parts of the country the workmen demand a six hours day, to be reckoned from the moment they leave home to the moment they reach home again.—*Morning Post, 4th June.*

500,000 MORE HOUSES AFTER THE WAR

A deputation, which was the outcome of a non-party conference held in November last on the housing of the working classes, waited upon Lord Rhondda, President of the Local Government Board, yesterday, and laid before him a resolution setting forth that the lack of houses for the working classes was due to the Finance Act, 1910, and that the Government should encourage and support private enterprise and co-operative effort in the provision of healthy dwellings for the people.

Sir John Rolleston, past President of the Surveyors' Institution, who introduced the deputation, which represented a number of societies interested in the subject, urged that private enterprise was not again likely to meet the demand for such houses unless it was encouraged by the Government. The first thing to be done was to secure the repeal of the first part of the Finance Act of 1909-10.

Mr. E. Evans (President of the London Property Owners' Protection Association) said that they did not ask for subsidies, but for loans at a reasonable market rate of interest. Approximately £30,000,000 per year was required to provide for the normal growth of the population in England and Wales alone.

Mr. Colin Campbell (President, National Farmers' Union) said that money should be available, at a reasonable rate of interest, for the building of houses for the agricultural classes. This would go a long way towards solving the food problem.

Lord Rhondda asked how many houses would be required immediately after the war. On being told that the number was about 500,000 in urban and rural districts, he said that the matter was very urgent, and it was important that the Board should be prepared, so that after the war they would be able to put their schemes into operation at once. As regarded a loan, they would have to satisfy not only him but the public on that point, and no doubt they would be able to do that. There was a widespread impression that the State would have to provide something in the way of grants-in-aid for the erection of houses that were undoubtedly necessary. He wanted to hear the opinions of all who had practical experience in the matter, and when these had been thoroughly digested his Department could make a public declaration on the subject.—*The Times, May 23rd.*

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