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WHY CIVIL WAR: WHY REVOLUTION The Land Question in Spain and Brazil

Mr John Langdon Davies has revealed in the columns of the *News Chronicle* the fundamental cause of the upheaval in Spain, based on his observations on the spot, and what he has to say about the land question explains not only the Spanish conditions that have led to civil warfare but also the poverty and unemployment with which practically every country is afflicted. His story is confirmed in the equally revealing contribution to the *Daily Herald* by Señor A. Ramos Oliveira, formerly editor of *El Socialista*; and one more article, for the lesson it teaches deserving to be quoted freely, is the story of Brazil and its revolution which Mr Philip Jordan has told in the *News Chronicle*.

Here, in part, is Mr Davies's testimony, writing in the *News Chronicle* of 9th June:—

I stood in the silent streets of the old city in Cáceres, squares surrounded by superb Renaissance and mediæval palaces, empty, shut up, lifeless; except for those which had been turned into schools. Here there used to dwell the families who own all the land for miles around.

They had added village to village and turned most of the land between into dehesas, uncultivated land with a few trees and cattle, and despoblados, empty of human beings. And long ago they had gone to live in Madrid—absentee landlordism, and latifundia, vast estates, gone to waste: an old story this which Rome knew to its cost, the old story of the wreck of agriculture and village life by owners who spend the scant profits of the soil elsewhere, instead of putting them back into the soil.

Castille, Andalucía, Estremadura—these are the lands of the latifundia and the starving peasantry and these are the lands of the raised fist. Not far from Madrid, for example, is a village I know.

The village, the houses, the water, the trees, the fields, all are owned by one man, who lives, heaven knows where, and does nothing. The sweat of the living and the bones of the dead as they mingle with the soil are alike his, for he owns the cemetery also. Hundreds of peasants are out of work; the land cries out to be cultivated; no one has a right to raise a potato or a blade of corn. Spain is made up of a thousand villages like that.

In the Province of Toledo there is a village called Villa de Don Fadrique, where three hundred "yunteres"—owners of animals—and five hundred "braceros" had no work or land to work on. "If

"until a Commission had been sent from Madrid to study the problem, seed-time would have gone by, and what good would the victory of the Popular Front have been then?"

"What we did was to summon the 20 rich men of the village and tell them that we knew they had the money and that they must provide enough to feed us and to set us to work. After much argument they did so. Enough money was advanced to put everyone to work at necessary improvements which had been neglected by the landlords, and no one has starved." This sort of thing has happened commonly: the "rich" are agreeing with their enemy in the way.

One of the reasons for the tremendous sweep of the Popular Front last February was that the Gil Robles-Levroux Government had done everything it could to destroy the work of the first two years of the Republic in the repartition of land.

In countless cases land-owners, relying on the backing of the police and the Government, had ruthlessly destroyed the work done by peasants on their new holdings.

Imagine the feelings of men who had just gained the right to save themselves from starvation by planting crops on land paid for at a just rent, when the landlords, profiting by a change of government, came and ordered half-grown crops to be ploughed under, or confiscated the little harvests which had cost so much in toil, which had meant so much as a symbol of a new day.

These peasants have no very fixed political philosophy; many of them cannot read; but they have grasped certain simple generalisations and have learned to act and hope on them.

Unlike the British industrial proletariat, the Spanish town worker realises that he can get nowhere without capturing the countryside; hence a formidable propaganda for united action between workers and peasants.

The hundred thousand and more peasants who have been given the right to cultivate land in the last few months have a very simplified economic philosophy—land plus labour equals food and life.

* * *

Señor A. Ramos Oliveira, in the *Daily Herald* of 27th July, explains that "the violence originated with the Conservative classes who provided their gunmen with arms and a plentiful supply of money. And now the army has risen, in its own words 'against a regime of disorders and strikes!'"

It was not the relative disorder of the last few months which led the group of army plotters to "save Spain" in this peculiar fashion. The principal cause of the counter-revolution has been the Agrarian Reform, which dates from the Law of 1932, made when the Socialists were in power.

At that time there were made several settlements of country families on the land, and the Government took over the estates of the nobility: most of these estates were abandoned and naturally uncultivated.

But before the Law was properly carried into effect, and was being debated in Parliament together with the Statute of Catalan Liberties, General Sanjurjo rose in rebellion on 10th August, 1932. He declared that the object of his insurrection was to prevent the approval by Parliament of both these measures: the Statute of Catalonia and the Agrarian Reform Law.

From 1933 to 1935 the Right Wing was in power. It reduced wages to hunger level, destroyed all that the Government had done in the way of Agrarian

Reform, and provoked the Workers'-Republican Revolution of October, 1934.

Spain is an agrarian country. The country folk, about 60 per cent of the whole population, have a deep craving for the land. In some places, notably in the province of Toledo, they had seized their plots of ground before the arrival of the functionaries entrusted with the distribution.

The taking and cultivating of these abandoned estates by the country folk roused the indignation of the landowners, who like their allies, the army, saw in this action nothing but anarchy.

The Spanish landowners, who are represented by all the reactionary groups except the Catalan League Party and the Basque Nationalists, have used their Press and money to campaign against the Republic and to provoke the military rebellion. The rebel army leaders, sons or brothers mostly of the landowners, have really risen against the Agrarian Reform.

* * *

And turn from Spain to Brazil as another example. Mr Philip Jordan, in the *News Chronicle* of 29th July, tells the episode of the epic march of Luis Carlos Prestes "imprisoned now in the hot dungeons of Brazil and held there secretly at the pleasure of the lycanthrope who governs the country in the interests of its foreign investors."

Brazil, nominally a sovereign state with which his Majesty's relations "continue to be friendly," is, in reality, little more than a semi-colonial possession of the world's two great democracies, Great Britain and the United States of America.

The immense resources of her voluptuous and yielding soil are mortgaged to the banks of London and New York.

Her transport is ours; her mines, her fertile plains, her power stations and her public utilities pour tribute into the pockets of British and American rentiers, leaving a residue of wealth only for the small ruling class, composed almost entirely of the armed overseers of absentee landlords.

That her peasants, driven to forced labour, exist on the edge of starvation, is in some measure our fault; and that, therefore, she breeds leaders of the quality of Prestes will ultimately be to our credit, for Prestes conceived the ideas, grotesque in South America, that a man is entitled to the fruits of his own labour and that serfdom is no proper status for the creature who is made in the image of God.

In the last days of October, 1924, he led 1,500 men from the Rio Grande do Sol on a libertarian crusade that was to last for four years and to cover something like 20,000 miles before it was conquered by the malicious terrain and climate through which it carried the torches of revolt against oppression.

Government airplanes searched them out to bomb them; armies equipped with the latest weapons thundered in their wake; and on the head of Prestes the price was high. But the purpose of that crusade gave them an intrepidity which we who worship freedom from an armchair find hard to understand, and by whose agency we are in no danger of suffering intoxication.

For eight more years, since climate and disease ended that great march, Prestes was the flame around which men who love freedom gathered to warm their hearts; but in the end the soldiers of the Government captured him. That was last March. What tortures he has had to undergo since then; what wavering, beaten thing he may now be, we do not know. . . .

In this age when the ugly head of reaction darkens the skies above us, he is a shining star for all men to see and to care about until the liberty for which our fathers fought valiantly comes to men and women less fortunate than we.

* * *

These articles speak for themselves nor is there need to make extensive comment. The causes that lead to war between nations are the causes that create discontent and misery within the boundaries of each nation. Unavailing are the plans and policies that would try to ensure peace by disarmament, arbitration, collective security of a group of nations against any one of them that would take to arms, or any of the pacifist formulæ. The idea underlying the League of Nations was that measures should exist to prevent the nationals of one country proceeding to murder the nationals of another, measures, however, that ignore the economic causes leading to strife; and so the Covenant of the League of Nations is but a blank piece of paper, as far as provisions are concerned for grappling with the pent-up forces which are working steadily to overthrow civilization, and within each nation for itself. To permit some individuals to exact tribute from the earnings of other individuals, is to divide society into the haves and the have-nots, and the disparity ever increases. At the root of the trouble is the private appropriation of the rent of land, the price of access to natural resources raised so high as to be a barrier against occupation and the chance of a livelihood, making idle land and idle men the utterly unnatural and most violent contrast. This usurpation is a fact which should stare every one in the face who thinks at all on the anomaly, that with Nature so prolific and material progress so immense, the share of these blessings among the members of society is so monstrously unequal. It is foolish to speak of this as a problem. It is not so. It is the inevitable and easily perceived result of an elemental injustice, so that we have no problem to solve but only a task to undertake. Certainly the obstacle to overcome is vested interest in conditions as they are, which become more extreme while appetites grow by what they feed on. But civilization should be a process of enlightenment whereby moral progress keeps pace with and outdistances material progress. Reason should discover mistake and goodwill rectify bad law. That has always been the hope of democracy which by education and a free franchise, by the art of persuasion that honest men and women are multiplied to respect, will ultimately carry conviction even among the beneficiaries of the present order. Lasting peace and universal wellbeing may only be attained by a morally minded humanity. Civilization has the faintest of chances if brute force must be the final resort of desperate men.

A. W. M.

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