

THE LAND QUESTION IN EASTERN EUROPE

[On April 5 the *Arbeiter Zeitung* published the following highly suggestive article on "The Social Meaning of the Peace in the East." It throws light upon a factor no less fundamental than the racial question in the future development of Eastern Europe.]

"The Russian Revolution has dispossessed the great landowners and declared the land of the churches and monasteries, of the nobility and capitalists, to be the property of the people; this has already been carried out throughout Great Russian territory. Whatever may be the fate of the revolution, the landowners will not recover their land, and it will remain in peasant hands. . . . As the French reaction after 1815 could not dare to deprive the French peasant of the land which he had taken in 1793; as the Austrian counter-revolution after 1848 could not dare to restore Robot (forced service), tithes and seigniorial courts; so, too, no future Russian Government will be able to restore the nobles and bishops to their former property.

"If Livonia and Courland, Lithuania and Poland were not to-day held by German troops, then the Russian agrarian revolution would naturally have a powerful influence on these countries also. In the two former the peasants are Letts and Esthonians, the proprietors Germans. The peasants are not owners but tenants, and the landlords still enjoy rights against the peasants such as recall the golden age of feudalism. What a terrible hatred prevails there between landlords and peasants was shown by the bloody horrors of the revolution of 1905. If German troops were not in occupation, the Russian agrarian revolution would at once spread to the Prussian frontier. . . . And if the ducal caps of Courland and Livonia were really united to the German Imperial crown, then the German barons will have permanently saved their land. For German suzerainty will naturally find its support in the German barons, and not in the Letts and Esthonian peasants who, after centuries of class rule, are full of wild hatred of the German. Germany will naturally not be able to dispossess the class on which alone her rule can rest. This, then, is the social significance of the union (*Angliederung*) of Courland and Livonia to Prussia; it secures the country from the infection of agrarian revolution, and secures the land of the big proprietors from peasant expropriation.

"In the same way in Lithuania the German soldier is protecting the land of the Polish *Schlachta** against the Lithuanian and White Russian peasants; and, in the same way, in Poland the landlord is seeking the protection of the Central Powers against the peasantry, which can very easily be infected by the Russian poison. . . . † The order established by the Central Powers throughout the East has everywhere the important social result of guaranteeing the property of the landlords against peasant risings.

"This fact is of the greatest importance for the Central Powers—above all, Prussia. Even before the war the agrarian constitution east of the Elbe was being more and more fiercely attacked. Powerful currents inside the German people demanded the 'internal colonisation' of the East Elbe districts, which belong almost entirely to the Junkers. These currents would certainly be irresistible if, throughout Eastern Europe, the large properties had been divided up among the peasants. Not merely because the example of such an upheaval would have awakened the greed of the Prussian agricultural labourer, but, above all, because the

agrarian revolution in Poland, Courland and White Russia would have deprived the Prussian Junker of the labour without which he cannot exist, for the East Elbe *Rittergut* rests on the exploitation of East European labour. For long past the Junker has not been able to find enough German workmen as his slaves. He can only keep going owing to the fact that every year hundreds of thousands of Polish, Lithuanian, Little and White Russian peasants, cottagers, and workmen emigrated to Germany and worked the Junker's fields for a meagre wage. As long as the peasantry in Poland and Lithuania has so little land that it cannot live on its own produce, the Prussian Junker is sure of finding pliable material for exploitation among these wandering workmen, the so-called *Sachsengänger*. But if the land in Poland and Lithuania were divided up, and the peasants could live on what they produce, the stream of wandering workmen would dry up. . . . The *Rittergüter* would have to be parcelled out, and soon throughout East Germany, where to-day the Junker rules, there would be a series of peasant properties. . . . And with the land policy of the Junker the Junker's dominion would also collapse. Thus it can be understood what an interest the Junker had in separating Poland and Lithuania from Russia and protecting them from Russian infection. In protecting the property of the *Schlachta* he is saving his own property and his own rule. This is the social meaning of the Peace of Brest.

"And the Eastern Treaties have the same meaning for Austria and Hungary as for Prussia. Imagine the Russian agrarian revolution having spread to Poland; it is clear that in that case the property of the Polish *Schlachta* throughout Galicia would have been untenable. Imagine the land of the boyars in Roumania divided among the peasants; and it is obvious how difficult would be the position of the big Magyar landowners in Transylvania who are sitting upon Russian peasants. And this shock to the landed interest in Galicia and Transylvania would also have placed the Bohemian feudal nobility and the Hungarian magnates, the great lay and ecclesiastical landlords all over Austria and Hungary, in a very uncomfortable situation. For them, too, the order dictated in the East by the sword of the Central Powers has a good meaning.

"The Eastern peace treaties do not, of course, merely mean this. They have set free the great masses of troops which are now dealing heavy blows against England in the West. They placed large territories at the disposal of the Central Powers which will supply us with food and raw material and take our industrial products. But they are also of great social importance. They have prevented the extension of the Russian agrarian revolution to the territory of the border peoples, and have thus averted imminent danger from the landed interest in Germany and Austria-Hungary. They have erected a dam against the demands of the peasantry. If ever any peace had a counter-revolutionary effect it was this one. The Baltic barons and the Polish *Schlachta*, the Prussian Junkers, the Magyar magnates and the Roumanian boyars—all can enjoy the fruits of this peace."

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* Nickname for the large Polish landowners who, till 1907, enjoyed a monopoly of political power in Galicia, and are still extremely powerful. Here the phrase is applied to landlords throughout Poland.

† We omit here a false analogy with Roumania, which does not affect the central argument.