

CZECHOSLOVAKIA : A DRASTIC LAND POLICY

In the *Contemporary Review* of December, 1926, Mr Christopher Turnor has an article upon the changes in the distribution of land since the War.

The area of the country is 35 million acres, and a much larger proportion of this has been cultivated than is the case in Britain. It has long been very largely in the possession of great landowners, who have generally had interests also in industrial concerns, and it may be due to this that the large estates have been well cultivated.

Since the separation from Austria and the establishment of a republic very drastic changes have been made. In April, 1919, was passed the "Law concerning the Sequestration of Large Landed Estates," affecting about four million acres. It imposed a limit of 375 acres of agricultural land to the possessions of a single owner, but this might be supplemented by woodland up to 250 acres. About two and a half million acres have been dealt with by the Land Office up to April last. The owners have received compensation to the extent of £5 to £7 10s. per acre, the land being sold for £7 10s. to £17 10s. per acre.

Mr Turnor remarks that "the whole procedure is costing the public purse nothing . . . it should be a source of revenue, but it is certainly not sound from the economic point of view."

Existing buildings, suitable for farming on a large scale, are not used to full advantage, and cultivation is less efficient. The chairman of the Colonization Society for Slovakia is quoted as saying:—

"A State Office has little initiative; it can devise regulations but it cannot colonize."

But he favours a committee composed of practical colonists, officials appointed by the Ministry of Agriculture, and certain agricultural experts.

The Land Office may perhaps not possess much initiative in the way of business, but it seems to possess a good deal in the way of interference. Landowners are bound to notify the Land Office before engaging, say, a forester, and further they have to accept any man whom the Office may appoint.

This land legislation is not the work of a Bolshevik or Communist Government, but of a Republican Government organized upon ordinary lines. Yet its work must be admitted to contain a large element of confiscation, and it is interesting to compare it in this respect with a moderate measure for taxation of Land Values. Compensation at the rate of £5 to £7 10s. per acre, sales at £7 10s. to £17 10s., when the market value is stated to range as high as £37 per acre in some cases—these seem to involve a policy of summary dispossession. And, in spite of this arbitrary interference with the rights of property, Mr Turnor, whose judgment in these matters is that of experience, says that it is not successful from the economic standpoint.

It leaves unremedied the interests and the faults which we associate with private ownership of land almost untouched; it alters the distribution of land, but it does not make for a good distribution of wealth in future; and it has not promoted the best use of either land or capital. Rather it bears all the marks of legislation in a hurry or of beginning at the wrong end.

When we consider the smallness of the results which have accrued from government interference in Britain—compulsory division of farms, compulsory grouping of railways which were already sufficiently large units for effective management—when we add the results of interference on similar lines elsewhere, we see the desirability of a policy which will facilitate the establishment

of every industry and every department of industry upon the scale to which it is best adapted. Such a result can reasonably be claimed for the policy of the Taxation of Land Values, which more than any other is a policy of industrial elasticity as well as of fiscal and economic certainty.

GEORGE CROSOER.