

The Land Question in Russia

By A. Daudé-Bancel

In 1926, I had published at the "Bonne Idée" Press (152, rue de Vaugirard, Paris) a book on *La Réforme agraire en Russie* (Agrarian Reform in Russia) in which I examined the evolution of the land system in Soviet Russia and the old Russia. If my conclusions on the Tsarist system were severe they were not less so on the Soviet system. I stated then that the U.S.S.R. could only regenerate itself correctly if it knew how to carry out a fundamental land reform, completed by a thorough-going system of co-operation in Russia, a country essentially agricultural.

But instead of giving free course to the passion which the *moujiks* always have had for possessing land, of substituting the Georgeist tax on the value of the bare land for all other taxes, and using *freely* in co-operation the means of credit, of production, and of exchange, Lenin and his friends under the pretext of achieving Marxism nationalized the industries of the U.S.S.R. and have made there the most extensive experiment of State Capitalism in the world.

The masters of Soviet Russia were so much imbued with State Socialism that at the beginning of the seizure of power they broke up the existing co-operative organization, but when they realized the results of this grave mistake they loosened little by little their grip on the co-operatives which remained free until 1935. At this date the agricultural co-operative societies (*kolkhozi*) became *in fact* obligatory and the urban consumers co-operative societies were *compulsorily* amalgamated with the State industries.

The Great War was an excellent excuse for the Russian people to dis-embarrass themselves of the Tsarist government. It was replaced by a provisional government the head of which, M. Kerensky, was capable of nothing but making speeches. In the field of land reform he was quite incapable of submitting to the Duma a bill which (once the expropriation of the estates of the Crown, of the Church and of the great landed proprietors was completed) would have generalized the enjoyment (individual and collective) of the land under conditions of liberty and responsibility for the occupiers and replaced the heavy taxes which were crushing the *moujiks* by a tax-rent on the value of the bare land. Further, in a country with a very high birth rate a realist government would have felt itself obliged to busy itself in very extensive works of improvement of the soil in order to procure arable land for the new households and by these measures of social foresight would have successfully combated the "land-hunger" which has always characterized the Russian peasantry.

Before the War Stolypin had side-tracked this reform by a crude plan for introducing the metayer system, desired by the Cadets. He had been impelled in that direction by Herzenstein, who (see my *Réforme agraire en Russie*, pp. 62 and 63) opposing the Russian nobility in 1906, paid with his life for having advocated the compulsory alienation of the land in order to avoid the Revolution, the violence and excesses of which he foresaw.

Kerensky not having the capacity of a leader, Lenin and his friends put themselves at the head of the *moujiks* and as an appeal to the mob handed over the land of Russia for the "black partition," that is to say, they assigned it to the *moujiks* without plan, without method, and in the greatest disorder. The *moujiks* being by no means prepared for communist life and being in most cases unfitted to replace the great landed proprietors whose estates they had split up, there was all over Russia an ordered disorder, with famine as its inevitable consequence.

Then it became necessary in 1928-29 to return to liberty of trading (N.E.P.), and the government in face of the insolvency of the peasants and their incapacity to guarantee a normal production hastened to collectivize the lands of the *moujiks*. Already, ever since the proclamation of the Leninist revolution, the government had directed itself to the creation of state collective farms, called *sovkholes*. But in spite of official bulletins of victory these compulsory co-operatives did not attain the success desired because the Russian peasant, like all peasants, desired above all things individual property in land.

The most intelligent peasants, or those with most money, incited the poor *moujiks* to make a strike, that is to say only to produce enough for the needs of their own families. These rebels, in spite of their very moderate way of living and the very small number of them who employed hired labour, were officially designated *Kulaks* (bourgeois peasants). The government wished to make a quick end of the sowers of discord and indiscipline. For this purpose they decided to create beside the *kulaks* (rich peasants), middle class peasants (*seredniaks*), poor peasants (*bedniaks*), and landless peasants, hiring out their arms (*batraks*). A rich peasant or a *kulak* was one who had two or three cows. At the end of 1929 the government endeavoured to liquidate the *kulaks*, that is to suppress the rural opposition to State bureaucracy. About 2,500,000 *kulaks* were expropriated from their possessions and scattered across the territory of the U.S.S.R., with or without their families. Most of them were sent to the northern forests to cut down trees; to dig the canal from the Baltic to the White Sea; to double the Transiberian Railway and to construct the metallurgical and electrical giants, and so on. The law of 1930 enforced the liquidation of the *kulaks* by penalties, as a result of which they and those who had been deprived of civic rights could not be admitted into the *kolkholes* or compulsory co-operatives. In fact, the *kulaks* were condemned to death: from 1930 to 1932 more than a million of these rebels disappeared.

The *sovkhos* being shown in practice to be too cumbersome to manage and burdened by parasitic officials, the government turned the attention of the peasants towards the creation of *kolkhoz*. These *kolkhoz* were created by the incorporation as communal collective property of the lands belonging to the *moujiks* themselves and those that formerly belonged to the great landed proprietors, to the churches, and to the Crown and its retainers, of which the *moujiks* had become possessed since the "black partition." Under the new

system all the necessary property, land and stock, of the *moujiks* was attached to the collective farm (called *kolkhoz*) or compulsory co-operative. There remained therefore to the freed *moujik* as his personal property only his *Isba* (family house) with its small *nadiel* (garden or orchard attached), his fowls, and a single cow. If he had more than one cow he was considered a *kulak* and treated as such.

This enforced addition of his property to the *kolkhoz* was considered by the peasant as an expropriation without compensation. Rather than willingly submit to it most of them killed off their live stock in order to eat it at once rather than see it become communal property. The cattle that were not slaughtered and which were placed in the stables of the *kolkhoz* were very badly cared for. The result of this totalitarian economic policy was as follows (see *Economie nationale de l'U.R.S.S.*, by J. A. Yoffe and B. V. Troitski, published by the Chamber of Commerce of the U.S.S.R., Moscow, p. 67) :—

NUMBER OF LIVE STOCK IN U.S.S.R.

		(Millions)							
		1916	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Horses	...	35.1	34.0	30.2	26.2	19.6	16.6	15.0	15.9
Cattle	...	58.9	68.1	52.5	47.9	40.7	38.4	42.4	49.3
Sheep and Goats	...	115.0	147.2	105.8	77.7	52.1	50.2	51.9	61.1
Pigs	...	20.3	20.9	13.6	14.4	11.6	12.1	17.4	22.6

PRODUCTION OF GRAIN AND OTHER VEGETABLE CROPS

		(Millions of quintals)				
		1913	1929	1932	1934	1935
Cereals	...	801.0	717.4	698.7	894.0	920.0
Raw Cotton	...	7.4	8.6	2.7	11.8	17.0
Flax	...	3.3	3.6	5.0	5.3	5.5
Sugar beet	...	109.0	62.5	65.6	113.6	162.1

Thus from 1929 to 1933 as a result of this economic policy both the live stock and the agricultural production, particularly of cereals, fell catastrophically and in a population steadily growing, in spite of the disappearance of more than 20,000,000 persons as a result of the revolution, was much below the stock and the production before the War. The regime was on the point of new catastrophes and it became necessary to reconsider the position. M. Tchernoff, People's Commissary of Agriculture, and M. Yakovleff, head of the Agricultural Section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, made the government of the U.S.S.R. to understand that the totalitarian Communist system was dangerous to the national economy and therefore to the Soviet State itself, hemmed in as it was by Germany, Poland and Japan. The existence of the State required that it should give free play to the activities of the members of the *kolkhoz* within the framework of the land and of the stock belonging to them. The interest of the State also required that the whole of the members of the *kolkhoz* should be *collectively* responsible for the payment of the taxes of the *kolkhoz*. This new orientation was made progressively. As soon as it became within the knowledge of the public, the live stock and the agricultural production increased (see the foregoing table). At the beginning of 1935 the

Seventh Congress of Soviets had a discussion on the new statute relating to collective farms or *kolkhoz*.

The *Moscow Journal* of 23rd February, 1935, gave an account from the pen of M. Karl Radek of this Congress at which 1,200 delegates were present and where the principal points in the report of M. Yakovlev were discussed. The debates lasted for seven days. Congress adopted the statutes relating to the agricultural artels (co-operative societies of agricultural workers), regulated the future policy of the *kolkhoz* which should be carried on in the interest of the public welfare. It once more declared the land to be the property of the State and asserted the superiority of large-scale collective farming over small individual exploitation and it laid down the statutes relating to family property beside collective exploitation.

In the fertile lands of European Russia and Siberia in addition to the family allotment (*nadiel*) of greater or less extent each member of the *kolkhoz* was entitled to have as his own absolute property in addition to one cow (already provided for), two calves, some sows, an unlimited number of fowls and rabbits, and twenty beehives. In the cold regions of Siberia in addition to the *nadiel* which varied in size from eight-tenths to one hectare according to the district, each member of the *kolkhoz* could have from 50 to 100 reindeer. In the other regions of Central Asia the corresponding figures according to the district were from five to ten cows, from 100 to 150 sheep, from five to ten camels, etc. In the southern republics of the U.S.S.R., Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan for example, districts more fertile than the Siberian steppe, each member of a *kolkhoz* could possess two-tenths to three-tenths of a hectare of cultivable land and could have as his own property a horse, an ass, and from 15 to 20 sheep.

Thus after the furious persecution of the *kulaks*, still called *dekulakization* of the country-side, the Soviet government veered towards the transformation of every peasant into a *kulak*, but what a miserable *kulak*! It was a question then, according to all the evidence, of replenishing and increasing the live stock and the agricultural production of the U.S.S.R. by stimulating the personal interest of the *moujik*. For this purpose the agricultural tax in respect of individual exploitation is very high so as to drive the refractory peasants into the *kolkhoz*. But it must not be thought that the members of these expend much of their industry in the *kolkhoz*. The publication *Reconstruction Socialiste de L'Economie Rurale* (No. 1 of 1936) states that "the cultivation of the *nadiels* gives to each member of the *kolkhoz* who devotes himself to the technique of cultivation and stock raising an income three times as great as that which he draws from his own labour in the *kolkhoz*."

The Soviet State derives the most part of its revenues from indirect taxation. M. Pierre Berland analysing the Soviet budget in *Le Temps* of 26th January, 1936, says that of 78,000 millions of roubles received, 62,000 millions are derived from the tax on turnover which falls on consumable articles. Of these 62,000 millions, 21,200 are levied on cereals, 6,000 on alcohol, 5,900 on sugar, 3,000 on meat, 2,600 on margarine and 4,000 on cotton. The difference between the price which the State pays to the producers of corn and the price at which it sells the bread to the consumers is 21,000 millions and thus it is that although under the Tsars the *moujiks* retained practically nothing of their

cereals, under the Soviet government with 85 per cent going to the State they retain in the *kolkhoz* (and these are in a more advantageous position than individual producers) about 15 to 20 per cent of the cereal production. Thus the production from the family allotment, *nadiel*, which should be an addition to the income, ends by being the essential part of the family budget.

Further, the figures quoted above show that the U.S.S.R. is in process of improving its agricultural production and, as this production is essential, the cost of living could be diminished in recent years (see the article by Jugoway in *Idée et Action* of June, 1936, on "Economics and Dictatorship" in the U.S.S.R.).

In short, the Bolsheviks have attempted to accomplish sovietism in Russia but this system implies the *free* discussion of individual and collective interests in the *free* associations (soviets) of *free* persons concerned in their particular circles (local, regional or national); and instead of a system of liberty the Bolsheviks have made out of sovietism exactly the opposite. They have, in fine, wished to nationalize everything and if they have relieved the bureaucratic constraint on economic and public life it was only because they were compelled and driven by the mute, but none the less effective, opposition of the peasants. Lenin in the past, and Stalin in the present, have pretended to work miracles and their miracle is in the nature of a catastrophe. They would have done well to ponder the prophetic words of Auguste Comte: "Violent revolutions are never deep-seated and deep-seated revolutions are never violent."

Le Temps of 30th August, 1935, announced that on 28th August there was sent to the *kolkhoz* of the province of Moscow the official instrument giving to that *kolkhoz* the perpetual usufruct of their lands and the *Moscow Journal* of 6th September also announced that "lands are granted in the U.S.S.R. to the *kolkhoz* with the right of perpetual enjoyment" and as an official journal it rejoiced in this information. A little later, on 8th November, 1935, in this same *Moscow Journal* M. L. Sosnovsky made a very well balanced comparison between the technique of the *Mir* and that of the *kolkhoz*, but this incense bearer of the Soviet regime omitted to make the indispensable analogy between the fiscal obligations towards the central power of the *Mir* and of the *kolkhoz*. In *La Terre Lorraine*, July, 1936, M. Lucien Brasse-Brossard has shown how under the former regime certain kinds of agricultural communities were created even by the landed proprietors who saw in the formation of these groups a greater degree of solvency, a guarantee that their obligations would always be paid. But we have shown in *La Réforme Agraire en Russie* that the Tsarist bureaucracy always clung to the preservation of the *Mir* which was in its hands the surest means, thanks to the collective solidarity of the *moujiks*, of securing the payment of taxes which individually they would have found it very difficult to discharge. Now, the *kolkhoz* are nothing but the *Mir* enlarged and technically improved, in which the members of the *kolkhoz* are bound, as in the former *Mir*, to account totally and collectively for the taxes.

As a result, and contrary to the declarations and assertions of the Bolshevik Press, the conferment of the land on the *kolkhoz* was not done for the purpose of benefiting the peasants, made by force to co-operate, but was rather for the purpose of facilitating the collection of the land revenue. It is also curious that at the moment when the Russian government made the agricultural

co-operatives (*kolkhoz*) compulsory, an act which at first sight appeared in the eyes of the ignorant as proof of ardent sentiments for co-operation, it suppressed the urban consumers co-operatives in order to incorporate them in the State industry. But at the same time in the country it was maintaining the consumers co-operatives by even enlarging their activities. Not only were these co-operatives under the influence of the technicians re-provisioning the peasants but still more they undertook the duty of purchasing at prices fixed by the State the agricultural products which the peasants had for sale. As the Russian State pays a very low price for agricultural products, the discontent of the peasants instead of manifesting itself against the State showed itself against the consumers co-operatives, and this was all to the good of the politicians and the bureaucracy of the U.S.S.R.

As regards the urban populations, the year 1936 appeared to be the opening in Russia of an era of important improvements if we are to judge by the programme of transportation and communication, as well as by the conditions of living and culture set out in *L'Economie Nationale de l'U.S.S.R.* According to the decisions of the Council of People's Commissaries Moscow is going to be reconstructed upon a plan which will allow for an expansion of population from three and a half million inhabitants on an area of 28,500 hectares to a population of five million on an area of 60,000 hectares. The plan when it has been carried out will be a remarkable work of urban improvement. Its achievement will be all the more easy because in Russia the land and sites are nationalized. All the land on which the Soviet State builds workshops, factories, railways, roads, canals, rest-houses, schools, hospitals and so on, in the centres of activity, does not necessitate the payment of a heavy price to the owners since it already belongs by law to the State, while in the capitalist countries the state is obliged to pay to the expropriated proprietors excessive increments of value.

An example will illustrate this point. During the spring of 1934 according to the *Moscow Journal* the English newspapers announced that of the 12 millions of gold roubles which represented the expense of construction of a bridge in London, 11 millions represented the compensation payable to the landowners adjoining the bridge.* Moreover, wherever the public authorities wish to transform insanitary areas into healthy accommodation, the process generally becomes burdensome for the community while enriching the owners of these insanitary areas, especially so if influential and not too scrupulous politicians are interested in the results of the operation.

In order to arrive at this result, and one certainly not to be despised, is it necessary to expropriate without indemnity the owners of the land of Russia? It is probable (see above) that if the Russian nobility had had the wisdom to institute a metayer system they would have avoided the revolution. On the other hand, if the great landed proprietors of Russia had been willing to disburden the *moujiks* of the taxes which were crushing them, by consenting to pay at least a part of the taxation which they should equitably have paid, they would not have excited against themselves the just anger of the oppressed *moujiks*.

* This is no doubt a reference to the Charing Cross Bridge scheme which (abandoned) was to have cost nearly £16,000,000 of which £11,000,000 was for property rights.—*Translator.*

The great Russian landed proprietors understood their interest no better than their duty and no more than do the present owners of the land. The consequence of their lack of vision (and in 1906 they had Herzenstein assassinated in Finland) was the revolution of 1917 with the results that you all know and of which the worst has been the death of liberty and the triumph of dictatorship in Russia.

Is a general conclusion for elsewhere to be drawn from this ?

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