

THE ROOTS OF THE SPANISH CONFLICT

This is the story of the economic causes of the Spanish conflict extracted from Chapters II and III of Mr Arthur Koestler's illuminating book *Spanish Testament*, published by Messrs Victor Gollancz, Ltd., London, and dedicated to Sir Peter Chalmers Mitchell :—

The roots of the Spanish question lie in the agrarian problem.

In any discussion of the events now being played out in Spain, it is imperative to bear in mind the fact that it has remained to this day a country with a semi-feudal structure.

The distribution of land in 1933 was as follows :—

Category	Number	Per-centage	Land owned	
			in hectares	percentage of total
Large landowners	50,000	1	23,200,000	51.5
Peasants owning large farms	700,000	99	15,800,000	35.2
Peasants owning small farms	1,000,000		5,000,000	11.1
Poor peasants	1,250,000		1,000,000	2.2
Agricultural labourers	2,000,000		0	0
TOTAL :	5,000,000	100	45,000,000	100

These figures serve as a kind of compass by which to find one's bearings in the Spanish chaos. They show that the landed aristocracy, which constitutes barely one per cent of the total rural population, controls more than half the total area of cultivable land. That is to say, fifty thousand feudal magnates own more land than the remaining ninety-nine per cent of the population put together.

The millions of small peasants and agricultural workers live in abject poverty and misery. About three million out of a total rural population of five million possessed in 1933 so little or such poor land that their standard of life scarcely differed from that of the agricultural labourers owning no land at all. . . .

In the villages the only law, the only authority, was the despotic rule of the *cacique*, the local boss, backed up by the rifles of the Civil Guard. Moreover, work was available only on a hundred to two hundred days in the year. Spanish agricultural labourers have always lived under the threat of starvation. For centuries their unspeakably wretched condition has been the most urgent social problem of the Iberian Peninsula.

This is the first fundamental fact that must be constantly borne in mind. The second concerns the position of the Church.

The Catholic Church is the largest landowner in Spain. This explains why the Spanish peasants' struggle for existence was bound at the same time to be a struggle against the secular power of the Church. The anti-clerical character of all Spanish mass movements since the seventeenth century is a direct and inevitable consequence of the temporal power exercised by the Spanish clergy ever since the expulsion of the Moors. . . .

When, on 14th April, 1931, the Spanish Republic was proclaimed, the progressive parties in Spain found themselves saddled with a completely bankrupt country which had only just shaken off the nightmare of the Middle Ages. The tasks which awaited the young

Republic were enormous, and it did not prove equal to them.

It was with extreme timidity and hesitation that the Republican Government tackled the burning problems that faced it, stirring up the embers of a smouldering crater, so to speak, with a drawing-room poker. . . .

From 1931 until the beginning of the reaction of 1933, out of a total of forty-five million hectares of cultivable land forty thousand hectares in all were divided up amongst the peasants; that is, exactly .009 per cent.

This was the state of affairs that was labelled by the reaction as "Communism and Anarchy." . . .

The offensive on the part of the reactionaries began with a highly organized plan of sabotage on the part of the big landowners in the spring of 1933. All of a sudden there was no more work to be had on the land. True, the agricultural labourer had the right to demand an eight-hour day and a wage of eight pesetas, but work he could not find. The landowners persisted in this tacit lock-out: they let their land lie fallow, and turned it over to pasturage; where formerly two hundred labourers had been employed, two or three shepherds now sufficed.

The position rapidly worsened; this policy of blackmail on the part of the governing caste succeeded in defeating almost every one of the Government's paper reforms. Expectation turned to disappointment; and in the elections of the autumn of 1933 the Right scored a victory. . . .

Immediately after the elections of November, 1933, which put Alejandro Lerroux into the saddle, the great offensive against the Republic and its reforms began. . . . The workers prepared to carry on a struggle against their starvation wages; strikes broke out and were bloodily suppressed. The despairing peasant masses waited in vain for the promised distribution of land; here and there, in Andalusia and Estremadura, they began to cultivate any land on the estates of the nobility which happened to be lying fallow—and paid for their precipitancy with torture and death. Gil Robles was openly demanding "the immediate liquidation of the legacy of the April Republic."

On 4th October, 1934, when the President of the Republic, Alcalá-Zamora, invited three members of the Gil Robles party to join the Government, the revolution broke out. . . . In Madrid the movement collapsed; in Catalonia an autonomous Republic was proclaimed, but twenty-four hours later its President, Companys, was forced to surrender. In the Basque country the struggle continued for a fortnight. But the greatest conflict of all flared up in Asturias. It proved to be the dress-rehearsal for the Civil War of 1936. . . .

The first Government troops despatched by Madrid against Asturias went over to the workers. . . . At this point, Gil Robles conceived a brilliant plan to save the situation; he sent for native troops from Morocco and for the Foreign Legion to crush the Asturian miners. . . .

After a ten days' massacre the Gil Robles-Lerroux Government considered that the time had come to apply the brakes. The African troops were withdrawn. But the courts were still busy turning out death sentences as though on a conveyor belt; in Madrid, Oviedo, Barcelona, Santander, Zamora, Leon and Gijon, 40,000 prisoners were sentenced to a total of 300,000 years' penal servitude. . . .

The distribution of the land among the peasants was declared null and void, the new settlers were evicted,

and the land was restored to its former owners, who let it lie fallow. Those feudal gentlemen who preferred to leave the land in the hands of the settlers were compensated by the Government to the tune of 500 million pesetas, while the Church received in compensation for the losses she had suffered 300 million pesetas. . . . The masses had returned to their old state of unspeakable misery and suffering. Still 10,000 Spanish peasant families continued to live in caves and sandpits, both in Andalusia and at the very gates of Madrid. . . .

This was the heritage which fell to the lot of the Spanish People's Front in February, 1936.

On 19th February, the new Government was formed with Manuel Azaña as Prime Minister. It was a liberal Government, composed exclusively of members of the liberal centre parties—nine members of the Republican Left, three of the Republican Union and a non-political general at the War Office. . . . From the very beginning, the defeated Spanish reaction concentrated all its efforts on making the world believe that Communism had come to power in Spain. It launched one of the most perfidious propaganda campaigns Europe has ever known—and one of the most successful.

A few days after the elections, Azaña, the new Prime Minister and veteran of the Spanish liberals, gave an interview to the correspondent of the *Paris Soir* :

"Before the elections," he declared, "we drafted a programme of minimum reforms; we intend to adhere to this programme. I wish to govern according to the law. *No dangerous innovations! We want peace and order; we are moderates.*"

The propagandists of the Right, however, averred that Azaña was aiming at revolution and the disruption of society. The campaign went on, and the Government did nothing to stop it.

The peasants could not make out what was happening in Madrid; and since they could not make it out, they

began to act of their own accord. At first in Andalusia and Estramadura, then in other provinces, spontaneous mass occupations of the large estates were carried out. The peasants had realised that they would only get the land if they took the law into their own hands. Descending in a body on the landlords' estates, they planted themselves down on their beloved land and refused to budge. . . .

Troops were despatched; 800 Assault Guards, together with the hated Civil Guard, penetrated into Caceres and Badajoz. But the peasants' movement was far too powerful, and it had the masses on its side. The Government withdrew its troops and despatched in their stead a staff of agricultural experts and officials of the "Institute of Agrarian Reform," who proceeded rapidly to legalise these occupations of the landlords' estates.

During March about 150 peasants were settled on the land every day; by April this daily figure had risen to 500; by May to 1,000. At last the Spanish agrarian reform seemed to have been launched in real earnest. . . .

Mr Koestler then describes the developments that followed, leading to the insurrection of the generals on 17th July, 1936. "The Civil War had begun."


Postscript.—Mr Koestler makes no reference to the attempts to introduce urban land reform by way of the rating of land values and of the arbitrary suppression by the reactionary Government of 1934-36 of the powers of the local authority to operate this reform. This was one of the contributory factors to the formation of the Popular Front.

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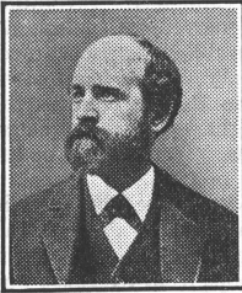
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