

A GLOBAL GLANCE AT LAND REFORM

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THE PENGUIN SPECIAL *From Yalta to Vietnam* by David Horowitz, is a searching analysis of American foreign policy since the death of Roosevelt. It is well documented and presents a significantly different version from the common or orthodox versions. It is well worth reading for anyone wishing to delve a little more deeply than the superficial treatment of the mass media. Readers will find the discussion of the land reform issue of particular interest, and accordingly a brief outline is here presented.

KOREA

In March, 1946, Kim's Communist Government of North Korea divided half the existing land among three quarters of a million landless peasants; as Horowitz observes, "this act promoted a feeling of loyalty for his regime from the start." In the south, the U.S. Military Government issued a decree two years after the northern reform whereby some 700,000 holdings were sold to 600,000 tenant families. But the Syngman Rhee Government delayed the land reform law continually; meanwhile tenants were being forced by their landlords to buy the plots they tilled on unfavourable terms or else be evicted. As a result of the dictatorial and reactionary rule many peasants felt they were better off under the Japanese.

VIETNAM

Prior to Diem's so-called land reform there were 600,000 landless peasants in South Vietnam; 2½ per cent of land owners owned 50 per cent of the land, while 70 per cent owned 12½ per cent. When Diem's "reform" became effective in 1959 the landless remained so, but a maximum rent (25 per cent of the crop) had been set. Peasants in areas formerly occupied by the Viet Minh, which had carried out its own reform, were far from satisfied, particularly those from areas which had been paying no rent at all. The Diem Government not only in effect sought to reverse the land reform of the Viet Minh, but also launched a wave of repression which soon resulted in insurrection and rebellion throughout the South.

GUATEMALA

In 1953 President Arbenz decided to press forward with agrarian reform as the keystone of his programme. It was action under this programme that precipitated friction between the U.S.A. and Guatemala; particularly the expropriation of idle land owned by the United Fruit Co., which to quote from R. M. Schneider's *Communism in Guatemala* had "bribed politicians, pressured governments and intimidated opponents to gain extremely favourable concessions for itself." In March, 1953 234,000 out of 295,000 uncultivated acres belonging to the com-

pany were expropriated; in August, 1953 a further 173,000 acres in another locality were treated likewise. The U.S. Government objected to the terms of the compensation, and began taking action, e.g., withdrawing its limited technical assistance to Guatemala. It is perhaps not superfluous to mention that John Foster Dulles, then Secretary of State, was both a stockholder and long-time corporation counsel for the United Fruit Company. A U.S. supported coup took place, and a military junta came to power. It suspended the agrarian reform, disfranchised the "illiterate masses," passed a law against "dangerous thoughts," and restored all lands expropriated from the United Fruit Company, as well as abolishing the tax on interest, dividends and profits payable to investors living outside the country. Indeed, according to A. G. Frank's "Varieties of Land Reform" (*Monthly Review*, April 1963), "at the rate at which land was distributed in Guatemala in the post-Arbenz years (1955-61), it would take 148 years for all peasant families to receive some land—if there were no population growth in the meantime."

CUBA

On May 17, 1959, Castro (after a second assault on the Communists) promulgated an Agrarian Reform Law which affected not only three large U.S. companies, but many Cuban land owners. This was followed by a U.S. protest note demanding "adequate" compensation, which Cuba was not in a position to meet. This issue undoubtedly promoted the cleavage between the two nations. Yet the compensation offered by Castro was far from parsimonious.

VENEZUELA

According to Frank (*op.cit*) land reform has been slow and has involved expropriation at extortionate prices. As Horowitz points out, the Betancourt programme in Venezuela, like other "reforms" promoted by the U.S.A., involved mainly resettlement. The break-up of large estates is not involved, but the buying of virgin lands, their reclamation, and the rather callous transfer of peasant populations to previously uninhabited areas. In other words, the power of the oligarchs remains unbroken.

IRAN

This rich oil country, another sphere of U.S. activity, had 90 per cent of the population illiterate, with 70 per cent of the land held by 2 per cent of the population. In 1945, although annual exports were valued at \$360 million, Iran was allowed less than a tenth in royalties, while the British Government received more taxes from its profits than the Iranians. The nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951 naturally had some repercussions! The upshot was that despite hundreds of millions of dollars of U.S. aid being poured into Iran, the gulf between the very rich and the poor was widened.

A major lesson to be learned from Horowitz's book is that "freedom" and "democracy" are futile, if not phoney, without social justice. And the latter inevitably and inexorably requires radical land tenure reform.