Post-war Agrarian Economic Policies (East Central Europe)

By Klaus Richter

Summary

Agrarianism became a major political force in the independent states that emerged from the western periphery of the Russian Empire at the end of the First World War. Politicians of agrarian parties attained influential government positions in both Poland and the Baltic States. Initially, agrarian reforms were introduced to curb Bolshevik influence. However, the long-term aims of agrarianism were both political and economic, with the economic empowerment of the peasantry as the core of the nation going hand in hand with the marginalisation of an economic elite perceived as “foreign”. Agrarianism thus contributed to the rise of interwar economic nationalism and ethnic conflicts.

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Introduction

In Poland and the Baltics – as in most of the states that emerged from the imperial peripheries after World War I – agrarianism was a leading ideology and agrarian parties gained significant political influence. In East Central Europe, two strands of agrarianism emerged: one class-based and the other based on ethnicity.[1] Agrarianism in Poland was based primarily on socio-economic considerations, whereas it took a much stronger nationalistic colouring in the Baltics. Agrarianistic political actors had a significant influence on land reforms, which in the Baltics were the most radical in all Eastern Europe, turning the societies there into the most egalitarian in Europe.[2]

There were several reasons for the rise of agrarianism in East Central Europe. The

distribution of land was extremely uneven and land reforms were thus deemed the most pressing socio-political issue in the new nation states. Politically, agrarianism was a result of the introduction of parliamentary systems and the emergence of mass politics.[3]

The roots of agrarianism, however, were older. Late 19th century nationalism in Poland and especially in the Baltics had placed the peasant culturally and economically at the core of the nation. Eastern European agrarianism blended this notion with ideas of the Catholic social movement and of the Russian *Narodniki* ("populists"), including nationalistic as well as liberal concepts. Agrarianism was never codified and thus not consistent; however, all strands of agrarianism assigned great importance to family farming as the basis for sustainable economy and society.[4]

Elsewhere in East Central and Eastern Europe, agrarianists before World War I motivated peasants to participate in institutions of self-government. However, in the Kingdom of Poland, the Baltic provinces and the so-called Russian western provinces which had been annexed from Poland-Lithuania, the fundamental basis for this was missing, as they had never received a full-fledged Russian *zemstvo* system.[5] In Poland and the Baltics, agrarianism mostly expressed itself in attempts to educate peasants and to organize them in co-operatives and associations. Moreover, the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the introduction of the Duma allowed for rudimentary political expression of agrarianists.

Landownership before World War I

In Congress Poland, peasant landowning had increased significantly after the emancipation of the serfs in 1864, but so had the rural population. Thus, peasant land was ever more segmented, which led to a large rural proletariat with very little land.[6] While emancipation reform helped reduce the number of landless peasants at first, their number rose to more than 17 percent in 1901.[7] In Lithuania, where the peasants had been emancipated in 1861, landless peasants at the beginning of the 20th century constituted 20 percent of the rural population.[8] In the Baltic Provinces, the serfs had been freed already in 1816-1819. In Latvia, 55 percent of peasants were without land at the outbreak of World War I[9] and in Estonia as much as two-thirds of the peasants were landless.[10]

At the same time, much land remained in the hands of the nobility. The Polish nobility's share in landownership decreased only from 50 percent in 1864 to 35 percent at the turn of the century.[11] In Lithuania, their share was at roughly 25 percent,[12] while the German-speaking

nobility in Latvia possessed 48 percent and in Estonia even 58 percent of all agricultural land.[13] The manor estates in the Baltic Provinces were particularly large with an average size of 200 hectares versus less than thirty hectares of peasant farms.[14] Nonetheless, the farms of Latvian peasants often exceeded the much larger estates in productivity.[15] In Lithuania and Poland, these disparities were less pronounced. The rise of nationalism in the Baltics where the nobility was German (Estonia and Latvia) or Polish (Lithuania) turned this socio-economic conflict into a political and national question before World War I. In Poland, this applied mainly to the partition areas of the German and the Habsburg Empire. German efforts to transfer land of the Polish nobility to German settlers by means of a settlement commission (*Preußische Ansiedlungskommission*) contributed to an upsurge of Polish nationalism. In Habsburg Galicia, the social conflict between Ukrainian-speaking peasants and the Polish land-owning gentry became a central point on the agenda of Ukrainian nationalists.[16]

The Formation of Agrarian Parties

In all four independent states, agrarians formed powerful – in some the most powerful – political parties. In Poland, the most important agrarian political party to emerge from the war was the Polish Peasant Party "Piast" (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe "Piast"* – PSL). Already in 1903, the party had been formed under this name in Galician Tarnów. Initially headed by the nobleman Bolesław Wysłouch (1855-1937) and the priest Stanisław Stojałowski (1845-1911), the party radicalized significantly in the following years, with its leadership subsequently shifting to the peasant Jakub Bojko (1857-1943) and then to Wincenty Witos (1874-1945), who started advocating for land reform before the German defeat as an instrument to counter Bolshevik influence, thus mobilizing a significant part of the rural population.

In the elections to the Polish Sejm in 1919, the PSL "Piast" received only 4 percent of the votes; nonetheless, Witos was appointed prime minister in summer 1920 when the Red Army was approaching Warsaw. He successfully rallied support against the Bolsheviks amongst the peasantry but resigned one year later, frustrated that he could neither implement his plans for land reform nor cut down on the size of state administration.[17] In 1922, the PSL "Piast" received 15 percent of parliamentary seats and Witos again became prime minister. PSL "Piast" remained one of the most powerful political parties in Poland until Józef Piłsudski's (1867-1935) coup and the ensuing *Sanacja* period.

In Lithuania, the most important agrarian party was the "Lithuanian Popular Socialist Democratic Party" (*Lietuvos socialistų liaudininkų demokratų partija*, for short: *Liaudininkai*), formed 1917 in Voronež. In 1922, it merged into the "Lithuanian Peasant Popular Union"

(*Lietuvos valstiečių liaudininkų sąjunga*). Its co-founder Mykolas Sleževičius (1882-1939) was appointed Lithuanian prime minister in 1918, 1919 and 1926; its member Kazys Grinius (1866-1950) served as prime minister from 1920–1922 and as president in 1926. The party only received slightly fewer votes than the stronger Christian Democratic Party in the elections for the constituent parliament but subsequently became strongest party in all free parliamentary elections of the interwar period. Their coalition partner, the Christian Democratic Party, although in disagreement with the agrarianists on other issues, had a very similar outlook on agrarian and economic reforms.[18] As industrial workers formed a comparatively small group in Lithuania while peasant farmers were comparatively large, the Lithuanian Communists could hardly compete with agrarian parties in 1919, which contributed to the overall lack of success of the Bolsheviks in Lithuania.[19]

The situation was different in Latvia where de-industrialization and war damages had led to high unemployment among the working class. Socialist parties managed to get over one third of the votes in all parliamentary elections in independent Latvia throughout the 1920s. Nevertheless, the Agrarian "Latvian Farmers' Union" (*Latvijas Zemnieku savienība*), founded in 1917 by Karlis Ulmanis (1877-1942), which received 18 percent in the first elections (1920) and then less and less with each following poll, managed to lead or participate in nearly all governments, thus becoming one of the most powerful parties.[20] The most distinguished political figures of interwar Latvia, such as the first foreign minister Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics (1887-1925) and first Latvian head of state Jānis Čakste (1859-1927) were members of the party. Ulmanis himself, however, dissolved the party when he established authoritarian rule in 1934.

In Estonia, the "Union of the Rural People" (*Eesti Maarahva Liit*), founded in 1917, merged in 1920 into the Agrarian "Farmers' Assemblies" (*Põllumeeste Kogud)* of Konstantin Päts (1874-1956). Another member of the party was the popular Estonian general Johan Laidoner (1884-1953). In 1920, the party attained 21 percent of the vote, only succumbing to the Estonian Labour Party (*Eesti Tööerakond*). In the following polls (1923), however, the "Farmers' Assemblies" became the strongest political party. While in 1926 and 1929 the party was second to the Socialist Labour Party, it merged in 1932 with smaller agrarian parties and instantly became the strongest party with 40 percent of the vote in the fifth parliamentary elections. For the whole period from declaration of independence until the coup of Päts in 1934, the Latvian agrarian parties headed most cabinets and exacted tremendous influence through agricultural cooperatives.[21]

Land Reforms

The single most important contribution of agrarian parties and ideology to the history of interwar Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were the land reforms. Discussion of land reforms had already started after the November Act of 1916, and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed in March 1918, provided for the establishment of semi-independent states in the former western periphery of the Russian Empire. In May 1918, on initiative of Wincenty Witos, the PSL “Piast” party passed a resolution demanding the division of Church lands and private estates larger than 200 hectares. The resolution drew tremendous criticism from Catholic and right-wing circles but mobilized support from peasants.[22] Moreover, land reform promised to be implementable without large difficulties, as before World War I when the German and Russian governments had encouraged the parcelling up of big estates in order to weaken the Polish nobility. In the years before World War I, as much as 120,000 hectares were parcelled out each year in all partition areas. The Sejm passed its first land-reform act on 10 July 1919. Thus, as the later Polish Minister for Land Reforms, Zdzisław Ludkiewicz (1923-1924), stated, land reform in Poland was seen as an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary process, also because of its tremendous financial and technical implications.[23]

In the Baltics, land reforms were regarded the most pressing social, political and national issue and their immediate implementation was seen as central to the successful emergence of nation states. Land reforms were expected to alleviate the considerable social problems posed by the existence of large masses of landless peasants. At the same time, land reforms were seen as a tool for the empowerment of the historically disenfranchised majority ethnicities over the “foreign” economic and political elite: in the Estonian and Latvian case the Baltic German and in the Lithuanian case the Polish nobility who were expropriated on a large scale and with little possibility to protect their property. This involved a substantial amount of national historical myth-making. For example, in the case of Latvia, where land reform was propagated as a late victory over the Teutonic knights who had taken the land from the Latvians 700 years earlier. The peasantry was considered the core of the nation; thus, agricultural issues were elevated above their mere economic significance.[24]

In the short run, the passing of land reforms was pushed in order to counter Bolshevik influence in the region which was regarded a major threat to Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian statehood from late 1918 to 1920. Thus, the governments of all three countries used the promise of land to mobilize recruits for the new national armies against the Bolsheviks. Moreover, in Latvia, which had lost its markets and much of its industry during the war, land reform also needed to provide for the industrial proletariat as the whole regional economy would need to be shifted towards the agricultural sector.[25]

In Poland, an act for the implementation of land reform was passed on 15 July 1920 which aimed at parcelling and distributing 2 million hectares of land belonging to the state and private owners, reimbursing the latter on the level of market prices. In case of non-compliance, expropriation was possible. Generally, Wincenty Witos tried to ensure acceptance from the landowners before implementing the reform.[26] Landowners were allowed to own a maximum of 150 hectares, with exceptions mainly for the former German territories and the eastern regions. There, landowners could own as much as 400 hectares. A second land-reform act provided for a limit of 180 hectares in these regions as well.[27] Moreover, a special statute was passed in December 1920, proclaiming all untended and abandoned lands in the eastern regions, which were to be attached to Poland as a result of the Riga negotiations, property of the state and thus set for distribution to Poles, mainly to military veterans.[28]

While Polish land reform was rather limited in scope, the land reforms in the Baltics were revolutionary. They were implemented even before constitutions were adopted: in Estonia in October 1919, in Latvia in September 1920 and in Lithuania in April 1922. Land funds were established to re-distribute land. Peasants could buy land from these funds well below market value and were allowed several decades to repay loans.[29]

In Lithuania, where Bolshevism was weak and the Christian Democrat Mykolas Krupavičius (1885-1970) and *Liaudininkai*-politician Albinas Rimka (1886-1944) cooperated in 1918 to ensure that excessive antagonism with Poland and Polish landowners in Lithuania would be avoided,[30] land reform was the least radical. Estate owners were allowed to keep up to 150 hectares of land and in total 77 percent of land re-distributed. In Latvia, the Social Democrats dominated the committee for the implementation of land reform and expropriated estate owners without compensation, a step opposed by Kārlis Ulmanis and his Farmers' Union. This step was aimed at winning over the masses who had sympathized with the Latvian Bolshevists, a force that was much more powerful than their Lithuanian and Estonian counterparts.[31] Estate owners were allowed to keep only fifty hectares. In total, 84 percent of their land was re-distributed. In Estonia, land reform was the most radical. 96.6 percent of the land of large estates was confiscated and landownership limited to fifty hectares. While the Latvian parliament confirmed on 14 April 1924 that no compensation would be paid to estate owners, the Estonian parliament ruled on 5 March 1926, that expropriated landowners could receive a (small) compensation. Both in Latvia and Estonia, land reforms were developed and implemented on a distinctly nationalist basis and they distinguished between German landowners on the one hand and Latvian/Estonian landowners on the other regarding the confiscation of land.[32]

Effects of the Reforms

After the implementation of land reform, farms of over 100 hectares only constituted 1 percent of all landholdings in the Baltics. Peasant-owned land increased by 17 percent in Lithuania, by 54 percent in Latvia and by 69 percent in Estonia. In Latvia, the share of landless peasants dropped from 61 percent in 1920 to 18 percent in 1937. Within a very short period of time, an agrarian middle class emerged in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The economic power of the Baltic German and Polish elite was broken. All these factors helped diminish support for Bolshevism significantly. The transformation of villages into individual farmsteads, begun already as part of the Stolypin reforms in 1906, changed the agricultural landscape fundamentally. By expropriating estates and curtailing the economic significance of villages, intermediary levels between citizen-landowners and the state were virtually eliminated in Estonia.[33]

However, a number of problems remained. In general, especially in Poland, demand for land outstripped land availability. This contributed to the creation of very small plots which could hardly be operated efficiently. In Latvia, new farms were on average merely seventeen hectares of size.[34] In the eastern region, Latgallia, they were on average even smaller than ten hectares. In Poland, where the land fund included only 10 percent of all land, 31 percent of the farms were not larger than five hectares and 34 percent were even only two hectares in size.[35]

Roughly speaking, the more radical land reforms in Latvia and Estonia were more successful than the more modest ones in Poland and Lithuania. In Lithuania, the number of landless peasants rose from nearly 60,000 in 1919 to 80,000 in 1940. In 1935, social unrest shook the Lithuanian countryside. Poland also had a surplus population in the agricultural sector of 3 million in the late 1920s as the main rural coping strategy of seasonal or permanent emigration had become more difficult to carry out than it had been before the war. By 1929, seasonal emigration of farmhands to Germany shrunk to 15 percent of its former volume.[36]

Latvia, where the population of landless peasants dropped from 61.2 percent in 1920 to 18 percent in the mid-1930s, had a different problem as there was a serious shortage of farm labour in the first half of the 1920s. Ulmanis suggested importing farmhands from Lithuania but ultimately the problem was solved by the import of agricultural workers from Poland, 40,000 of whom were working in Latvia by the end of 1930s and contributed substantially to the strengthening of Latvian agriculture.[37] Estonian and Latvian agrarianist politicians oriented themselves towards Denmark which served as a role model for a successful European agricultural state.

At the same time, agrarian reforms institutionalized the de-industrialization of Latvia and Estonia and their loss of importance as international trading posts. The former economic hubs became rural states with a high level of state interference and 60 percent of the population in Estonia employed in the agricultural sector and 66 percent in Latvia. Lithuania's percentage of agricultural workers was a high 77 percent but the region had already been predominantly agricultural before the war.[38]

The large scale of the land reforms and their strong social and national implications aroused high interest – and criticism – abroad. In Western Europe, for instance, the radicalism of the agrarian reformers in Latvia and Estonia led journalists to question if these states had in fact turned Bolshevist. Leading intellectuals such as Robert William Seton-Watson (1879-1951) and Albert de Lapradelle (1871-1955) took high interest in the land reforms and wrote articles on them.[39]

In Germany, Estonian, Latvian and Polish reforms, which were directed against the Baltic German nobility, agrarian reforms were mainly discussed within the context of territorial revisionism. The most famous German economist of the time, Max Sering (1857-1939), described Polish land reform in 1922 as a weapon directed against Poland's national minorities, especially the Germans.[40] In May 1923, PSL "Piast" signed the Lanckorona Pact with Polish conservative and nationalist parties which aimed at a strict Polonization policy and outlined future land reform.[41] This reform act of 1925 drew particular criticism as a breach of the Minorities Protection Treaty, as the vast majority of properties to be partitioned in contested regions such as Pomorze or Poznania, belonged to German landowners.[42] However, among the Polish population, the reforms enjoyed large support, so criticism from abroad could only delay but not obstruct the land reforms.[43]

Conclusion: Agrarian Movements in the Interwar Period

After land reforms were passed, agrarian parties lost the central point of their political agendas and thus their attractiveness to voters.[44] However, they still participated in and even headed many governments until 1926 when the Witos-led government in Poland and the Lithuanian government led by Mykolas Sleževičius were toppled by Józef Piłsudski and Antanas Smetona (1874-1944). In Estonia and Latvia, agrarians remained in power but were increasingly caught between left and right-wing extremist groups while at the same time flirting with collectivist, nationalistic and fascist ideologies.[45] Ultimately, the agrarian movements and parties in Estonia and Latvia provided the basis for the establishment of authoritarian regimes under leading agrarians Konstantin Päts and Karlis Ulmanis in 1934.

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