

THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF AGRARIAN REFORM IN LATVIA

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The present essay is an attempt to lay out what an explicitly social history of agrarian reform in the Latvian territories needs to investigate. In the course of time, as these research directions are pursued, there should emerge a history of the agrarian reforms that describes not only the reforms as such, their economic intentions and economic impact, but also their social intention and social impact.

Historically, among Latvians, radical alterations of rural life — the kinds of changes connoted by the phrase “agrarian reform” — have not always had the positive connotations the words carry in the English language. The phrase has been used in connection with at least six such major transformations in the past two hundred years: the 1804 peasant law in Livland, the emancipation of serfs in Kurland and Livland in the 1817—1819 period, the laws of the 1850s and 1860s that permitted Latvian peasants to start buying land, the agrarian reform of the early 1920s, the collectivization of the late 1940s, and the privatization of agricultural land that is going on now and will continue for some time.¹ But as virtually all other events in Latvian history, these changes are interpreted differently by the several interpretative traditions of Latvian history. If the historiography of each event — each “reform” — is examined carefully, then it becomes obvious that the dominant understanding of it does not necessarily place it into a sequence of continuous progress. Many Latvian historians, for example, have measured all these reforms by whether or not they reversed the situation created by the arrival of the German crusading orders in the twelfth century, which changed Latvians into an enserfed peasantry holding land from a feudal élite rather than owning it. Against this standard all “reforms” in subsequent centuries fall short. Thus the serf emancipation, though creating the beginnings of personal freedom, did so without land; land purchases starting in the 1860s immediately magnified the problem of landlessness because much land remained in the possession of non-Latvians; and the collectivization of the late 1940s, accompanied by massive deportations of the so-called *kulaks*,

¹ For more detailed description of each “reform”, see **Strods, H.** *Latvijas lauksimniecības vēsture*. Riga, 1992.

forced onto the Latvian countryside a form of agrarian organization that was said to have been alien to its historical traditions, and subordinated their work to plans made in faraway places. Only the agrarian reforms of the 1920s and the current slowly moving privatization appear in these interpretations to be truly rectifying historic injustices. In the abstract, "agrarian reform" can always be made to sound progressive, but when examined within differing frames of interpretation the history of such "reforms" always becomes ambiguous.

In the Latvian case, though we have various histories of Latvian agriculture — such as Svābe's and more recently that of Strods² — we do not have a history of agrarian reform as such, nor a history that places agrarian reform in the context of the social history of the Latvian territory of the Baltic littoral.³ Moreover, most of the standard Latvian history surveys that touch on the subject of agrarian reforms do not attempt to link them, in a persuasive way, to general social history of the kind that has been pursued by Western historians for some time now.⁴ The present essay is an attempt to lay out, by focusing on the reforms of the 1920s, what an explicitly social history of agrarian reform in the Latvian territories needs to investigate. In the course of time, as these research directions are pursued, there should emerge a history of the agrarian reforms that would describe not only the reforms as such, their economic goals and economic impact, but also their social intentions and social impact; they should also contain an evaluation of whether the actual results of the reforms bore any relations to the changes the reformers had intended to make.

The basic facts of the 1920s agrarian reform in Latvia are fairly well known.⁵ In 1920 the Latvian Constitutional Convention promulgated the basic agrarian reform laws, which, among other things, created a State Land Fund. These laws permitted the new state to nationalize 1203 landed estates and half-estates (*muižas* and *pusmuižas*) with a total area of about 734 thousand hectares and to transfer control over this land to the Land Fund. During the 1920s the confiscated land was redistributed to various categories of people, including veterans of the independence wars and the local rural landless people. It is estimated that by the mid-1930s, some 143,000 holdings had been newly created or enlarged by these reforms (or about 50% of all agricultural holdings listed in the 1935 census).⁶ Estimates of the number of persons affected by the reforms are not available, but if we assume a farming family of three (parents and a child), then the number of persons whose lives were directly affected by the reforms in Latvia could be as high as 300,000 persons or about 20–25% of the country's total population. There is an estimate that in Lithuania similar reforms

² Svābe, A. Grundriß der Agrargeschichte Lettlands. Riga, 1928; Strods, H. Latvijas lauksaimniecības vēsture.

³ On the right track toward the kind of history of reform that would be desirable is Svābe, A. Zemes attiecību un zemes reformu vēsture Latvijā. Riga, 1930. This work, of course, does not include a full analysis of the 1920s reforms nor of the post-World War II reforms.

⁴ Spekke, A. History of Latvia: An Outline. Stockholm, 1957; Bilmanis, A. A History of Latvia. Princeton, 1951; Svābe, A. Latvijas vēsture 1800—1914. Stockholm, 1959; Silde, Ā. Latvijas vēsture 1914—1940. Stockholm, 1976; Aizsilnieks, A. Latvijas saimniecības vēsture 1914—1945. Stockholm, 1968.

⁵ Aizsilnieks, A. Latvijas saimniecības vēsture 1914—1945, 242—245, 341—342, 497—504, 711—736. For descriptions of the early stages and instrumentalities of the 1920s reform in Latvia see Mednis, A. Agrārais jautājums un zemes reformas Latvijā (Riga, 1924) and Markaus, V. (ed.). Agrārās reformas gaita Latvijā 1919—1922 (Riga, 1922). For a statistical description of the accomplishments of agrarian reform during the entire interwar period see the official publication of the Ministry of Agriculture *Latvijas agrārā reforma* (Riga, 1938).

⁶ Rei, A. The Drama of the Baltic People. Stockholm, 1972, 137—138.

affected the lives of some 200,000 persons.⁷ These reforms were more than economic events: they were social events as well by virtue of their impact on the motivations, behavior, and futures of very large numbers of people.

Within the limited confines of this essay, four points can be made. First, judging by existing descriptions, historians of the 1920s agrarian reforms have felt most impressed by their political significance and scope, as well as by the break they represented with the centuries-long patterns of landownership in the Latvian territories. Consequently, historians have chronicled in great detail, first, the story of the legal side of the reforms, because this is adequately documented in the primary sources; and second, the aggregate statistics pertaining to land ownership: how many hectares were transferred to the national Land Bank, how many were redistributed, how many land owners of all types were created, and so forth. These aspects of the reform each have their own significance, of course, but this kind of history runs the risk of overemphasizing the uniqueness of the reforms and also does not yield much by way of social-historical information. To bring out the social-structural importance of the reforms we would need to examine them as a phase of a process that transferred ownership rights between various segments of the population residing in the Latvian territory — segments defined by income, by nationality, by generation, by residence, and by geography. Looked at from this vantage point the reforms of the 1920s continued a process that had started much earlier — in the 1860s and 1870s. The 1920s reforms changed the mechanisms of transfer, intensified its pace, and involved different sub-populations of erstwhile non-owners. One might also add that as part of an historical process the reforms cannot be dated by reference to the passage of the reform legislation alone. Transfers that took place in the 1920s are linked to those made earlier, as well as to those that continued to be made to the very end of the Ulmanis period. All in all, the social history framework carries the reminder that neither class nor nationality are the only significant population categories and that analysis should try to examine the trajectories of all manner of transfers.

Second, viewed as a complicated and interwoven series of title transfers, the reforms of the 1920s are brought into the equally complicated generational history of the Latvian and non-Latvian populations of the Latvian territory because title of ownership is detached from and transferred to individuals and families, all of whom have their own microhistories. At this level, then, the administrative and economic history of the reforms becomes social history in the deepest sense, because tens of hundreds of title transfers the reforms entailed were a part of the individualized histories of the former owners and the new recipients. Those individual histories, as can be expected, differed from each other in the extreme and ranged from the story of those titled *Ritterschaft* families whose land was confiscated almost in its entirety, to the entirely landless individuals to whom titles were granted. The generation of persons who in the 1920s either lost their titles or gained them was in each instance one of a series of familial generations, and their experience with the 1920s transfers was one phase of a longer chain of experiences before the 1920s and after. The extent to which a successful history of the 1920s reforms can be pursued on the basis

⁷ Plakans, A. Agrarian reform in the Baltic states between the world wars: The historical context. — In: An Overview of Rural Development Strategies for the Baltics. Center for Agricultural and Rural Development, Iowa State University. Report 93-BR 9, March, 1993, 7—14.

of documentation at this level is still an open question, but that that story has this microdimension is without doubt. We might add that the social history of land in other countries, even those where no agrarian reforms took place, has still to be written from this point of view; and that it can be done successfully only on the basis of archival information.

Third, within this same framework the question of the intentions and results of the 1920s reforms becomes very important, with their administrative history providing the historical evidence about the intentions. The reforms were not simply an inevitable byproduct of the emergence of the Latvian state but an instrument for accomplishing certain ends, believed to be necessary for the success of the new state. The new Latvian government was painfully aware of the potentially explosive problem of landlessness and of the need to act quickly to defuse it. The resentments created by land hunger had been characteristic of Latvian rural populations for a long time and to a great extent explained the popularity of Bolshevik slogans during the years immediately following independence. The enlargement of smallholder-ship was thought to be the means through which these resentments could be weakened and perhaps eliminated. There is also evidence that at least some of the reform advocates believed that the enlargement of the number of landowners would have beneficial demographic consequences: the availability of land would reverse the longterm demographic features of the Latvian population: not to marry at all, or to marry late, or to have relatively few children after marriage. The currently available descriptions of the 1920s reforms have not adequately pursued the question of whether these intentions were realized, or indeed what kind of evidence is needed to judge whether they were realized or not. There is evidence that the reforms, which did reduce severely the numbers of landless and thus, presumably, the depth of social resentments, created a whole set of new problems pertaining to smallholdership, which in turn had to be addressed by the national government both in the 1920s and 1930s. A considerable number of claimants sold their land immediately; others gave up farming in a few years for various reasons. Also, a recent article⁸ in *Latvijas Zinātņu Akadēmijas Vēstis* suggests that at least among rural owners the demographic trends that were negative from the viewpoint of the Latvian state were brought under control, if not reversed. On the whole, however, this question of intentions and results — particularly the question of unintended results — needs much further study. Pointing to the 1930s upward curve of agricultural productivity does not adequately answer the question whether the reforms were successful in terms of all the intentions the reformers had in mind.

Fourth, another social dimension of the 1920s reforms that has never been adequately researched relates to the clash of interests within the rural population during and after the reform. Though descriptions of the agrarian reform generally deal with these clashes as administrative matters, a thorough social history would have to document them fully. Many Latvian farming families had already been owners of land for at least two generations by the time of the 1920s reforms, and these now faced new competition — for land and in production — by the new farmers (*jaunsaimnieki*). One might mention from the outset that this question of the impact of reforms on those who are not the subject of the solicitude of the reformers has received very inadequate research in the history of socioeconomic reform generally. The question of who

⁸ Krastinš, O. Latvijas Republikas saimniecības vēsturiskie mērķi. — *Zinātņu Akadēmijas Vēstis. Humanitārās Zinātnes*, 1993, 1, 35—42.

was or was not entitled to receive land from the national Land Fund was dealt with in the Reform Law by the creation of various categories of possible recipients — participants in the Latvian Independence Wars, the local (*pagasts*) landless, the local smallholders who wanted additional land, etc. — but the implementation of these categories proved to be very difficult and created many disagreements at the local level. Predictably, individuals who claimed the right to new land had very complicated biographies and conflicts had to be resolved by local reform committees. Equally predictably, as is always the case with land reform, interests clashed: between existing farmers who wanted to expand their holdings, arguing that larger farms were economically more justifiable, and the new farmers; between those who claimed participation in the Independence Wars and those who had actually participated; between future heirs of new or enlarged farms; and between the new farmers who expected help from the state so as to be successful and those who were not entitled to demand such help. It is tempting, of course, to immediately raise this question to the level of class warfare, but this temptation has to be resisted because lack of success was not necessarily the result of inadequate opportunity. What has to be resisted with equal fervor, however, is what might be called the “national unity” interpretation in which reform carried out by the national government was by definition successful because it was being carried out by an entity acting in the name of the “state” and “the Latvian people”.

The historical research necessary for a thorough social history of the 1920s agrarian reforms is now only in its first phase, which could be termed the *Fragestellung* phase. Existing descriptions in terms of aggregate economic statistics are a start, but they deal with the subject in question mainly as an aspect of Latvian economic history. Insofar as the 1920s reforms involved hundreds of thousands of persons and tens of thousands of families, however, these reforms have also a social dimension and have to be explored, on the basis of unused archival evidence, with social-historical questions in mind. This observation, moreover, can be generalized to apply to all of the “agrarian reform” of the past two hundred years. State-initiated and state-implemented measures in all cases were meant to radically alter the social lives and economic prospects of thousands of individuals and families, always, according to the reformers, in a positive direction. But at this moment we do not know if the intended effects were achieved, or if there were unintended effects that were more important than the intended ones, or if achieved affects were in fact due primarily to the reforms or to other circumstances. The archives may in time yield satisfactory answers to such questions.

AGRAARREFORMI SOTSIAALAJALUGU LÄTIS

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Viimase kahesaja aasta jooksul on Lätis tehtud kuus agraarreformi, mis on radikaalselt muutnud maaelu. Sellest hoolimata, et Läti põllumajandusajaloost on olemas arvukalt uurimusi, puudub ometi agraarreformi ajalugu käsitletuna sotsiaaljaloo kontekstis. Senini on agraarreformide analüüsil rõhutatud kahte aspekti: reformide poliitilist tähtsust ja sajandeid kestnud maaomandisuhete lõhkumist. Tähelepanuta on jäänud reformide mõju tohtu hulga inimeste tulevikuks, käitumisele,

tegevuse motivatsioonile ning kogu ühiskonna sotsiaalse struktuuri muutumisele. Käesolevas kirjutises on püütud 1920. aastate Läti agraarreformide analüüsi põhjal esile tuua agraarreformi sotsiaalajaloo aspekteid, mis vajaksid uurimist. Kompleksse käsitluse tulemuseks peaks olema agraarreformide ajalugu, mis ainult ei kirjelda reforme kui selliseid, nende majanduslikke eesmärgi ja majanduslikku mõju, vaid ka sotsiaalseid eesmärgi ja sotsiaalset mõju.

СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ ИСТОРИЯ АГРАРНОЙ РЕФОРМЫ В ЛАТВИИ

Андрейс ПЛАКАНС

За последние 200 лет в Латвии проведено шесть аграрных реформ, которые радикально изменили жизнь деревни. И хотя написано много работ по истории сельского хозяйства Латвии, все же отсутствует исследование по истории аграрных реформ, проведенное в контексте социальной истории. При рассмотрении аграрных реформ до сих пор подчеркивались два аспекта: их политическое значение и разрушение модели существовавших столетиями землевладельческих отношений. Вне внимания осталось огромное влияние реформ на будущее людей, их поведение, мотивацию деятельности и на изменение социальной структуры всего общества.

В данном эссе и делается попытка выявить на основе анализа аграрных реформ 1920-х годов в Латвии те социально-исторические аспекты аграрных реформ, которые нуждаются в непосредственном изучении. Результатом комплексного рассмотрения должна явиться история аграрных реформ, которая описывает не только реформы как таковые, их экономические цели и влияние, но и социальные цели и социальное влияние.