

Imperial Germany

The Struggle for the Land

With the fundamental Law of Settlement in 1886 Bismarck began the fight for the land on a big scale. He demanded and received a hundred million marks for the purpose of buying land and settling German peasants on it; that is, the purpose of increasing the numbers of the German element in the Eastern Marches. The work of colonisation is the backbone of Prussian policy in the Eastern Marches, for it settles Germans in the Eastern domain. And the whole problem in those parts is the problem of the relative numerical strength of the German population as compared with the Poles. The national acquirement of the eastern parts of Germany was begun by settlement a thousand years ago, and it is only by settlement that national possession can be maintained. The problem of the Eastern Marches is really not the least complex. Its solution depends less on political wisdom than on political courage.

Bismarck set to work vigorously on the basis of the new law, and during the first five years, from 1886 to 1890, about 46,000 hectares* were acquired from Polish owners. The beginning of the 'nineties afforded a splendid chance to the activities of the Settlement Commission, as an attendant phenomenon of an otherwise lamentable event. Owing to the plight of agriculture, the price of land fell rapidly, and it would have been easy to acquire a huge mass

* One hectare = 2.47 acres.