

The Famines of Russia

ALTHOUGH as a general thing a non-partisan Providence makes the rain to fall alike upon the just and unjust, an exception must be made in the case of Russia, where the Bolsheviks are somehow to blame when the ground-hog sees his shadow, or the seed-corn rots in the ground. Such at any rate, is the impression created by the common editorial practice of holding the Bolsheviks responsible whenever the peasants fail for any reason to produce food enough for themselves, or to deliver a surplus to the towns. Naturally this interpretation of the news is put in jeopardy by any admission that the misbehaviour of the elements may mitigate the guilt of the Bolsheviks, for such an admission may suggest the advisability of a search for other conditions affecting the production and distribution of food, which are not directly attributable to Bolshevik activity or entirely subject to Bolshevik control.

Recent reports of drought and famine in Russia have put us in the mood for such an inquiry, which may properly begin, we think, with an examination of conditions in the good old days when the Bolsheviks had as little power in Russia as the Communist party has now in the United States. Very frequently our tory friends take occasion to remind us that in the pre-revolutionary era of peace and plenty, Russia was a grain-exporting country; which is, of course, the truth, but not the whole truth. At least Mr. H. N. Brailsford believes that it is not the whole truth, for in his recently published volume "The Russian Workers' Republic" he states that the surplus of grain for export

came solely from the Ukraine, the Volgo Valley, the Caucasus, and Siberia. Central and northern Russia were never at the best of times self-supporting, and it is only over these regions which have always had a food deficit, that Bolshevik rule has been uninterrupted. Their problem was to feed a country which never in Tsarist days had come near to feeding itself.

This statement is doubtless capable of statistical proof, and yet our case does not rest upon the establishment of this proof. Whatever may have been true of the several regions of Russia, each considered as a unit, it is quite certain that a huge proportion of the peasants themselves were unable to maintain their own lives by agriculture alone. At the time of the emancipation, in 1861, the peasants had been expropriated from a part of the land they had occupied as serfs, and excessive redemption dues had been imposed upon the lands allotted to them as freedmen. Heavily handicapped at the outset by these conditions, the muzhiks were quite unable to increase their holdings in proportion to the increase in their numbers, and at the end of half a century of "freedom," the average size of the plots occupied by peasant families was only a little more than half what it had been at the time of the emancipation. In "The Russian Peasant and the Revolution," Mr. Hindus says that in 1905

in forty-seven provinces of European Russia, out of the 11,956,876 peasant households, twenty-three per cent. had less than five dessiatines (13.5 acres) per household, and seventy per cent. had less than ten dessiatines (twenty-seven acres) per household, whereas according to the computation of Government experts the average family required at least 12.5 dessiatines (33.75 acres) to provide it with adequate sustenance.

Writing in 1904, Mr. Geoffrey Drage said that only 8.5 per cent. of the peasantry could spare any of their agricultural products for sale, while 70.7 per cent. could not produce enough food to meet their own needs. Such being the case, it is obvious that some of the food which the peasants themselves consumed, as well as a considerable proportion of the surplus exported to the towns and abroad, was produced on the estates which remained in the hands of the landlords.

For their insufficient allotments, the peasants

were obliged to pay an extortionate price. One authority estimates that at the prevailing market-price, the redeemed lands were worth 689 millions of roubles. The valuations actually fixed for redemption-purposes came to 923 millions, and by reason of the accumulations of interest, fines for delayed payments, and other like charges, the peasants had already paid down a total of 1,390 millions of roubles when further payments were cancelled at the time of the revolution in 1905. In its capacity as real estate agent for the nobles who had formerly held title to the redeemed lands, the Government had thus collected from the peasants a sum in excess of the value of these lands which was in effect a personal ransom. With allotments which would not yield enough food to keep body and soul together, much less produce a surplus to cover the redemption dues and the indirect taxes which replaced them in 1905, many of the peasants were driven to domestic competition with new factory-industries, and masses of them were dumped wholesale into the labor-market of an industrially backward country, where their part-time work on the landlords' estate and in the factories kept wages close to the level of starvation. Even the peasants' expedient of dividing their time between wage-work and the cultivation of their own lands did not save them from periodic disaster; thus in 1911 a crop-failure brought on famine, and the central and local authorities extended relief to eight million people.

To our way of thinking, it was primarily the near-starvation of the peasant food-producers of Russia that turned the respectable revolution of the Cadets into an economic earthquake. The Provisional Government had hardly come to power when the peasants began a jacquerie which was to continue indefinitely, without regard to the ineffectual opposition of the pre-Bolsheviks, or the superfluous approval of the Bolsheviks themselves.

Whether the Government condemned or subscribed to the seizure of the landlords' estates, the peasant uprising was preparing the way for a civil war in which the muzhiks would belong to one party, and the dispossessed landlords to the other; nor was it to be expected that industry and transportation could escape the ruinous effects of this civil war, whatever might be the disposition of the industrial workers and the Government. If the pre-war misery of the peasants was inevitable, then the agrarian revolution was inevitable: the shortage of imported and domestic manufactures to be offered in exchange for farm-produce was inevitable; and neither requisition nor "free trade" could forestall the famine in the towns, which was likewise inevitable.

By their direct attack upon the old land-system, the peasants themselves have cleared away the chief obstacle to their own well-being. As a class, they are now able to produce on their own lands all the food which they formerly produced, plus the surplus which they were obliged to purchase from the landlords. Many observers have reported that they have taken advantage of their new opportunities to such an extent that they are now better fed than they ever were in pre-revolutionary times. The pinch comes when drought or flood destroys the crops in a particular district, and forces the peasants to depend, as the towns must always depend, upon sources of supply over which they have no direct control. It is then, and then only, that the peasant as a food-consumer feels the effects of conditions in industry and transport which he himself, as a food-producer, has done so much to create.

In all this, there is very little that has to do with bolshevism. If the Bolsheviks could have prevented the starvation of the peasantry—in this grain-exporting country—in the days of the good Tsar Nicholas, they might have prevented the economic revolution and the subsequent starvation of many Russian townsmen, and of those peasants whom Providence occasionally tosses into the same dependent class with the dwellers in the towns. As things stand today, not what the Bolsheviks hope to do, but

what the peasants have done is the chief factor in the Russian situation. If the opposition of the peasants to the Bolshevik regime has been by no means so fierce as their opposition to the ex-landlords, it is because the Bolsheviks have acquired in the work that the peasants themselves have done to relieve the starvation of their own class, the hundred and twenty million food-producers of the Old Empire—"The Freeman," (New York).

THE POSSIBILITIES OF TRADE.

TRADER will revive, sing the "wise birds" of the press, and the approach of winter will see the world passing through the most acute form of economic depression into the bright lights of prosperity.

Staid, conservative bank presidents, presidents of railroads, members of Rotary clubs, in soft, lilting tones join in this light-hearted melody—"Trade will Revive."

Whence springs the inspiration for the song; have the boundary lines and territory which once separated the countries of Europe, been restored to their 1914 settings; are the debts and deeds of war forgiven and forgotten, that the joyful notes gather strength from day to day?

No; crop reports from Europe and Great Britain announce drought, the worst in generations threatens those countries with famine; and bankers, jobbers, and the motley crew that make up the "rif-raf" of capitalist society; see in the sorry plight of Europe payments from farmers in this country for those outstanding debts contracted for binder-twines, binders, gas, worn-out parts of Fords, food, clothing and shelter for themselves and stock, all of which are but little necessities, though hard to obtain, required for the greater development of the land.

Farmers and the unemployed in Canada will receive help from financiers in Great Britain; these latter fry will open the money-bags containing the wages for the harvesting of Canada's crop which, when it snugly reposes beside the greater part of last year's in the elevators of the country will prove a more potent force for winning concessions from Russia, and a more powerful weapon of coercion than the forces of the State, for reconciling the conflicting interests in Upper Silesia and the Rhur Valley. A monopoly on the lives of the people of Europe is what this control over the wheat supply of Canada amounts to.

The devitalizing effects of starvation for seven years on the population of Central Europe, the disease and pestilence arising out of this condition, the crimes and vice which multiply as these conditions become worse, threatens the very props of civilization and the entire fabric of capitalist society, even to sounding the death-knell of the race.

Such a condition can not go on unchecked: no slaves, no profits; but not until natural forces supported the more powerful of economic forces was it possible; so long as there was a show of foodstuffs in those countries it was possible to keep up the conflict in each others interest.

A common foe faces each European country today, famine, and circumstances favor British and American capitalists to establish reconciliation in their interests. The proofs of this are not to hand yet; but the speculations in this direction become more logical and sound. Hence the song—"Trade will revive."

To what extent will trade revive; or it is too problematical to write about? These are the facts:

Conferences are already taking place in Berlin, Paris, London and New York, representatives of banking institutions are discussing with the foremost representatives of the financial world the problem of credit and the best methods for dealing with the economy of Europe.

To start industry again in a number of European countries is a task that will require years and enormous

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