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First World War and the Radicalization of the Agrarian Problem - Case Study- The Former Târnava Mică County

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Abstract

Throughout the modern epoch, the agrarian problem represented one of the most sensitive aspects of European countries, which triggered serious multiple consequences from an economical, social and political point of view. In this context, Romanian society went through profound changes, determined both by the extremely difficult situation most of the population found itself in, especially in the country, and by the entrance of foreign capital into the Romanian market. Thus, after peace was signed at Adrianople, in 1829, when the Ottoman commercial monopoly was abolished, the Romanian Principalities entered the European market mainly through the export of cereals. These radical changes determined the increasing interest for land exploitation in a context in which most properties were not economically viable as the surface of the lots was reduced, consequence of the frequent inheritances, sales and donations that took place in time. The improvement of the severe social situation the rural population was in determined Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza to take measures for restoring the rural property. Consequently, the Rural Law was applied starting from 1864. However, despite this measure, the situation of the rural population did not change significantly. The lack of land continued to be the greatest problem in the country, leading to the great revolt in 1907. First World War, during which the main fighting men were peasants, determined Parliament and King Ferdinand to consider the agrarian problem the most imperious issue to be solved after the end of the war. In the given context, as in the case of other regions in the country, in the former Târnava Mică County, Dumbrăveni Rural District, the lack of land aggravated by the effects of the war influenced the way the agrarian reform developed and was applied.

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1. Introduction

The existence of great empires, like the Ottoman, the Tsarist and the Habsburg ones, influenced the affairs of the countries in Southeastern Europe, which experienced a slower development compared to the other states on the continent. While in most of the countries in the western and northern part of the continent feudal relationships disappeared gradually through the 18th century, being replaced by large capitalist farms as it happened in Great Britain or by small farms in Scandinavian countries, the obsolete feudal relationships survive in the Romanian Principalities. Furthermore, these relationships were aggravated by the regime of Ottoman domination in Moldavia and Muntenia (Greater Wallachia), and by the domination of great agricultural holdings having mostly Magyar owners in Transylvania.

After the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-1829, when Turkey was defeated once more, in the year 1829 peace is signed at Adrianople, through which the Ottoman commercial monopoly was abolished and the Romanian Principalities were able to export freely, once more after a long time, at prices much higher than the ones paid by the Turks on the European market.

According to the economic and political analysis between the two world wars, like Ștefan Zeletin and Virgil Madgearu, this date marks the entrance of the Romanian Principalities into a new era, the one of modern capitalism in market economy, and the return to the great European economic family.

In the given context, although in specialist literature the agrarian problem in its diverse aspects was and still is intensely discussed, there still are aspects, areas or paradigms that have not been studied in detail. Consequently, these necessitate new reflections focused especially on archives. Taking into consideration the shown aspects, the carried research has as a goal studying the particularities of the evolution of the agrarian property in the former county Tarnava Mica reported to both the specific characteristics of the area as well as to the implications of the first world conflagration at a national level.

2. The Current State of Knowledge

Located at the interference between Europe and Asia, the Romanian Principalities were of interest to the great European powers, especially to the Tsarist, Austriac and Ottoman Empires. This was the area that connected Europe and the Orient, where European merchants, using the waterway of the Danube River and the Black Sea, managed to get to Constantinople faster.

Possibly the best example in this regard are the decisions taken at the Congress of Paris in 1856, which established the freedom of navigation on the Danube and brought the unification of Moldavia and Muntenia into discussion in order to stop the Russian offensive towards the Balkans and Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, where most ships carrying merchandise between Europe and Asia sailed. France and Great Britain, the countries most interested in this region, considered the Romania Principalities the main area of economic interference between Europe and Asia. Thus, through their representatives, they eliminated the Russian protectorate over the Romanian Principalities, which went under the regime of collective guarantee offered by the seven great powers (Platon, 1985, pp.270)

All these external factors had a positive influence on the economic development in the Romanian Principalities and definitively marked their entrance into the great European market. As a consequence, for a considerable period of time, Western countries imported significant quantities of cereals from these regions, not only due to their quality and their accessible transportation on the Danube, but mostly due to the price which was much lower than the one in Great Britain, Italy, Denmark and even the one in Russia, the country with the largest cereal production and also the greatest exporter on the continent. While the two Principalities exported 200.000 tons in 1846, in 1871 they reached 1 billion tons, and in 1911 approximately 3.9 billion tons (Murgescu, 2010, pp.111 – 112).

This evolution shows that Romanian exports followed a positive trend after the unification of the Principalities in 1859, encouraged by the favourable European economic context. The preoccupation of Western countries, especially Great Britain, for industrialization in the detriment of agriculture and mostly of cereal cultivation, created a good opportunity for Romania to cultivate the agricultural land more intensively, especially by the great owners, and also to export the goods resulted. However this also led to the aggravation of social tensions, especially after the

boyars increased the number of working days for the peasants that had to tenant land. Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza, together with the government headed by Mihail Kogălniceanu, tried to consolidate the property of the peasantry through the agrarian reform in 1864. Consequently, peasants received approximately 2.5 million hectares of land and, what is more, judicial freedom and the possibility of buying back the feudal obligations they had to the boyars (Murgescu, 2010, pp.122 - 128).

Although, focusing on consolidating peasants' properties, a great number of peasants were recognised the right of property over the land they cultivated for the landlords, as the land destined to be taken into possession was insufficient, still many of them remained dependant on their former lords (Bărbulescu, et al, 2004, pp.326- 327).

After the Romanian War of Independence (1877-1878) there was another movement of giving land to the peasantry, especially to the young couples who were starting a family, named "the reform of the newlyweds" by contemporaries. Despite these measures being taken, the great economic and social problems in the rural regions aggravated. This was also determined by the population growth between 1860 and 1914, during which the population almost doubled, from 3.9 million to 7.7 million (Murgescu, 2010, p.122).

The difficult situation in Romanian villages led to the great peasants' revolts in 1888 and 1907, when the liberal government, in order to put an end to the anarchy that spread across the entire country, used more than 100.000 soldiers, who even used cannons to stop the revolt, killing circa 10.000 peasants (Crampton, 2002, p.42).

Despite the liberal government that ruled in Romania after 1876 taking a series of measures to industrialize the country, which led to the migration of some of the active population from the country to the cities, at the beginning of the 20th century most of the population lived in villages. As a consequence, despite cultivating land as an occupation, circa 300.000 householders had no land, representing 32.7% of the rural families, while a significant number of peasants were earning a living as day labourers (Știrban, 1988, p. 184; Agrigoroaiei, et al, 2003, p. 102).

Many Romanian politicians of different orientations discussed the economic and social problem of Romanian society at length and tried to find pertinent solutions in this matter. One of the most relevant analyses of the distribution of agricultural properties was made by the deputy Emil Costinescu, which was presented in the session of the Lower House on 9 March 1907. He emphasized the disproportions and inequities in the distribution of agricultural properties in Romania, where only approximately 1500 landowners had a total of over 3 million hectares of land, many of which had over 500 hectares, while more than 5 million peasants had only 3.3 million hectares of land – circa less than a hectare per family. Furthermore, he showed that, as before, a main cause of the aggravation of the situation the peasants were in was the unprecedented spread of tenancy, which, the deputy considered, had to be stopped as soon as possible (Dimisianu, et al, 2007, p. 15).

According to international statistical data of the analysed period, the annual meat consumption per capita of only 9 kilograms and of milk of 4 litres, placed Romania among the last countries in the world at the beginning of the 20th century (Șandru, 1975, p. 22).

This image representing the majority of the Romanian population contrasted with the standard of living of its minority, represented by the great landlords, tenants, manufacturers, merchants, politicians and bankers, who lived in a luxury similar to the wealthy population in Western Europe. The social bias was enforced also by the lack of education in the country, where most children did not attend school.

The same as in the Romanian Old Kingdom, in Transylvania the economic situation of peasants was extremely difficult, as most of them had insufficient or no land, especially Romanian peasants. While Magyar families owned an average of 6 yokes of land, Romanian families owned only 1 yoke (Șandru, 1975, p. 22), meaning that Magyars owned 18.9% of the farms with a surface of less than 2.5 hectares and 85.4% of the large properties with a surface of over 500 hectares, while Romanians owned 70.5% of the small properties and only 5.7% of the large ones (Vesa, Pușcas, 1988, p. 142).

The situation of the population in this region was also worsened by the fact that Transylvania was neglected by the authorities in Vienna, and, after establishing the dual monarchy in 1867, also by Budapest. After the revolution in 1848-1849, the Austrians were reserved to invest in Transylvania as they were not certain whether the province would continue to support the secession. Through the "common customs tariff" introduced in 1850 the position of Transylvania as an agricultural annex to the empire was accentuated. In the given context, economic investments were made particularly in the central regions of the empire, which created a significant disparity regarding the standard of living. As a consequence, the population in Transylvania and Bukovina were among the poorest

(Mureșan, Mureșan, 2003, p. 120).

The Romanian leaders who had put their faith in the emperor, after the failure of the Transylvanian Memorandum, started to become more pragmatic, to become aware of the fact that no one would be able to help them in their dream for a political, economic and national emancipation but the Romanians from the Old Kingdom. Therefore, they would focus more on the economic and educational problem and on intensifying the connections with the cultural associations in the Old Kingdom (Hitchins, 2000, p. 211).

At the beginning of the 20th century the Romanians and the Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian Empire fought for their national rights as the government in Budapest started a forced Magyarisation policy mainly in schools. This measure determined many Romanians to stop their children from attending school which aggravated their economic and political isolation (Bărbulescu, et al, 1998, p. 406).

Before the outbreak of First World War, the liberals led by the energetic young Ionel Brătianu were trying to obtain the king's support in accomplishing two reforms that were fundamental for Romanian society – a radical agrarian reform, that would create the middle class, and an electoral reform to introduce universal voting. In addition, according to the vision Romanian leaders had, an agrarian reform in Transylvania was supposed to stop the emigration of the Romanian population, which could create problems for the Romanian National Party, that was preparing the Great Union together with the governors in Bucharest.

The entry of Romania into war in 1916 on the side of the Entente accelerated the beginning of the procedures necessary for the awaited agrarian reform. In the summer of 1917 when the great battles of Mărăști, Mărășești and Oituz took place, King Ferdinand, who was on the battlefield to encourage the Romanian soldiers, promised to accomplish a radical agrarian reform after the war. This reform was also imposed by the new international context, after Russia, one of the allies, with the same structure of property and external commerce, more exactly cereal cultivation and export, had been taken over by the Bolshevik Revolution, which could extend to Romania.

By the Decree-Law on 14 December 1918 the general principles of expropriation were legislated in the Old Kingdom. Thus, the forests were excluded from expropriation and basements became property of the state. In addition, the land that was to be expropriated could not be sold directly to peasants, but it had to be tenanted by organizing peasants into collectives led by a Central House of Cooperative and Appropriation of Land. The expropriation of 2 million hectares of land was also regulated (Șandru, 1975, p. 49).

On 12 September 1919 the Decree-Law for the agrarian reform in Transylvania was published, after being voted by the High National Romanian Council of Transylvania and signed by King Ferdinand (Scurtu, 1982, p. 88).

According to this decree all the properties belonging to the absentees, meaning the people who from 1 December 1918 and until the publication of the document were abroad without having an official mission, were expropriated, with the exception of the ones who had rural properties with a surface smaller than 50 yokes. Also, by this decree it is shown that the landowners had the right to choose the area of the property that would not be expropriated, provided that the one given to the peasants was appropriate for parcelling and for being used efficiently and sensibly. In addition, they had the right to reserve, everywhere they had land, half of the area not to be expropriated for a child who, up to 1 December 1918, had started economic studies and after graduation would become active in agriculture (Hamangiu, 1919-1922, p. 735).

In comparison with the Old Kingdom, in Transylvania the expropriation was made focusing on landowners and not on properties, as the fact that there were mostly hills and mountains in the region determined the properties belonging to the great landowners to be scattered on extended areas. While in the Old Kingdom the law mentioned that the land was expropriated due to reasons of national utility, in Transylvania, with the specific ethnic mosaic, the concept of public utility was used to avoid challenging national sentiments.

Up to the spring of 1921, 40.879 hectares belonging to the "absentees" were expropriated, 90.115 hectares belonging to foreign citizens, 143.855 belonging to the state, 407.030 hectares belonging to institutions and 1.553.547 hectares of private properties (Șandru, 1975, p. 49). Thus, over 1.4 million peasants were given land, with a total surface of circa 6 million hectares, which was the equivalent of two thirds of the properties larger than 100 hectares (Bozga, 1975, p. 65; Șandru, 1975, p. 49).

The definitive laws of the agrarian reform in 1921 regulated surface of the lots to be appropriated to 5 hectares in the Old Kingdom, 4 hectares in Bukovina, 6 – 8 hectares in Bessarabia and 7 yokes in Transylvania, and if the land to be used in this purpose was insufficient, the surface of the lots could be reduced (Șandru, 1975, p.146).

3. Research Methodology

Throughout the advanced research, focused on studying and analyzing the agrarian problem in Europe, Romania and especially in the former Târnava Mică County, the present paper has used detailed documentation based both on specialist literature, and the study of archived documents that are related to the topic.

Based on the ideas found in specialist literature and in previous research, the present paper adopts a constructive methodology, used in creating a synthesis and an antithesis of these ideas. Having this in mind, the focus is both on the analysis and the study of documents, and on a series of comparative analyses with the purpose of identifying the social particularities and implications of the specified region in the context of First World War.

4. The Agrarian Problem in the Former Târnava Mică County – Case Study

The appropriation of land did not respect the surfaces regulated in the definitive laws of the agrarian reform in all the regions in Romania. In Transylvania, mostly in the regions where Transylvanian Saxons lived, the process of appropriation was very difficult due to their opposition towards the Romanian population. Transylvanian Saxons probably contributed most to the economic development of the region, but in what concerns cohabitating with other ethnicities they were extremely reticent, as they were afraid not to hinder their national identity. These aspects were observed both by the historian Nicolae Iorga, and by other authors, who also represented this ethnicity in a positive light. The study "Punct crucial în Ardealul de Nord" is relevant in this concern, mentioning that in 1919 "The Transylvanian land marked so evidently from a cultural point of view by Saxon diligence, cannot be too narrow for 210.000 people, who represent honesty, hard work, frugality and sense of justice and truth." (Pintilei, Göbbel, 2004, p. 11).

One of the regions in Transylvania with a significantly heterogenous ethnic structure was Târnava Mică County, established after First World War. It had a surface of 1724 square kilometres, a population of 113.566 people, of which 57.801 Romanian, 31.392 Magyar, 20.372 German, 1.785 Jewish, 2.216 other ethnicities, two important towns: Târnăveni and Dumbrăveni and was divided in 4 rural districts: Târnăveni, Hususău, Dumbrăveni and Iernut. For example, in the analysed county, Dumbrăveni Rural District had a population of 30.086 people, of which 13.184 Romanian, 10.893 German, 5.724 Magyar and 88 Jewish (Martinovici, Istrati, 1921, pp.44 -45).

In this region, the Romanian landowners were much less numerous compared to the ones of other ethnicities. As a consequence, similar to the region it was part of, the majority population lacked a strong economic elite that would support it in the efforts towards national emancipation. For example, according to the data in archives, in 1921, in the former Târnava Mică County, Dumbrăveni Rural District, there was only one Romanian landowner who had 100 yokes in comparison with the Magyars, Transylvanian Saxons and Jewish population who had 38 properties of over 100 yokes¹, although the majority population of the district was Romanian (D.J.A.N. Mureș, Consilieratul Agricultural Fund, Târnava – Minor, File nr. 4 f. 1-46).

In most situations, the landowners in this region were Magyars or the lands belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Although 3.252 householders had the right to appropriate land, of which 2.010 Romanian, 581 Magyar, 434 Saxon, 226 Romani and 1 Serbian, until 1926 only 1.826 people received land, of which 1.279 Romanian, 326 Magyar, 127 Saxon, 93 Romani and 1 Serbian, in general with a surface of only 1 yoke each (D.J.A.N. Mureș, Consilieratul Agricultural Fund, Târnava – Minor, File nr. 6, f. 34). Consequently, the data analyzed shows that the reform had a democratic basis, as it focused on the economic necessities of the peasants and not on their ethnicity.

The very reduced surfaces the peasants in this county were given, as it happened in Transylvania in general, are due to the shortage of ploughland, as most of the land was covered by forests and grazings, which were not as fertile as the ones in the Old Kingdom. For example, compared to the latter, where most properties consisted only in ploughland, in the former Târnava Mică County, which had a surface of 172.210 hectares, the ploughland represented only 49.5%, the rest consisting in forests (16.64%), hayfields (12.10%), grazings (11.53%), vegetable gardens (2.06%), vineyards (1.42%), spinneys (0.07%), while the surface of the unproductive land was significant (6.75%) (Știrban, 1978, p.415).

It took a very long time for the process of appropriation and vesting in possession to be done effectively because

¹ 1 yokes = 5.753 square metres

of the opposition of the great landowners, who challenged in court the decisions taken by the commissions responsible with this process. Consequently, in the analyzed county, the last vesting in possession was registered in Pipea as late as 1940, when Second World War had already started in Europe (D.J.A.N. Mureş, Responsible Agricultural Chamber Târnava – Small, File nr. 9/a f. 23).

The political circumstances during and following war, amongst which the Civil War in Russia, the creation of USSR – the first communist state etc., triggered different measures such as the new agrarian reform by which the land was distributed to all poor peasants without taking into consideration their work capacity and agricultural implements acts. As a consequence, many peasants who did not have the resources necessary for an efficient agricultural activity received property.

As it has been mentioned, as in most regions in Romania, in Târnava Mică County too the surface of the lots appropriated was below the one regulated by law, and, in some cases, even the surfaces mentioned in the law were insufficient.

These limitations inherent to the reform determined the reduction of crops, far below the quantities recorded before war, and permanent ideological controverses between the representative of the main political parties.

Thus, Romania, including the analyzed region, was transformed from a country of great landowners into one of small properties, having, according to the Minister of Agriculture Garoflit, the highest percentage of land exploitation under 5 hectares, representing 70% of the total agricultural exploitation, with a large surface of uncultivated land, the result of the paths between the lots belonging to the small landowners (Şandru, 1975, p.146).

Conclusions

In the context of the aspects underlined in the present paper, considering the effects triggered, the conclusion reached is that the agrarian reform in 1921 was the most radical transformation of property both in Romanian history, and in the one of South-Eastern Europe, creating the premises of a type of agriculture based on the small rural property.

Furthermore, the aspects highlighted in specialist literature and through the research conducted lead to the idea that, as a consequence to different economic and social factors, endogenous and exogenous to the analyzed context, the objectives proposed by this reform were not achieved completely in Târnava Mică County – Dumbrăveni Rural District neither. The aggravation of the agrarian problem due to the effects of First World War triggered even more difficulties in applying the reform. Therefore, as in previous periods, the land lots given to peasants were too small, they had few working animals and obtaining means of financing by credit was almost impossible.

In conclusion, although the conditions necessary for the development of a viable agricultural property were not created, with all these drawbacks, the reform represented a real progress in the economic development of Romania, and of the analysed region, and determined the development of market relationships in agriculture. Simultaneously this led to the disappearance of large properties and, in Transylvania, to the abolishment of the monopoly of the property belonging mostly to the Magyars, thus participating to the improvement of the economic situation of the peasantry.

As a consequence, most personalities from the interwar period realized that the modernization of Romania could be obtained only by supporting agriculture, which had to be urgently improved in order for it to become one of the economic engines of the country, and thus to contribute to the growth of the population's prosperity.

The connotations given to the different aspects of the analyzed reform have been the topic of many comments and discussions, reason why new aspects will be taken into consideration in future research.

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