

# CURRENT HISTORY

October, 1919

*A Monthly Magazine of The New York Times*

## Aristocracy's Downfall in Europe

Triumph of the Small Landowner

By CHARLES SEIGNOBOS

**T**HE three great military monarchies which have lately fallen to pieces—Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and German—were all based upon an aristocracy of large landed properties, whereas the other European countries had become parliamentary and democratic States. Europe was thus divided between two political orders, founded on two social orders—in fact, into two different worlds between which the Elbe was approximately the boundary.

Western Europe, with its ancient civilization, its great cities, its big industries, its intensive agriculture and dense population, where the land is divided up into small or medium-sized properties, and where private fortunes made in industry, in commerce, and in banking form a large proportion of the total wealth of the country, has evolved a type of democratic society consisting mainly of bourgeois, of artisans, workmen, and peasant proprietors. There remain certainly some fragments of the old manorial system—in Spain, the great landed nobles of Andalusia; in England and Ireland, the properties of the landlords; in Italy, the latifundia of the southern provinces and of Lombardy—but these survivals, if they confer upon certain privileged families pre-eminence in the world of society, no longer carry with them political power. The direction of public affairs rests with the middle classes and with the elected representatives of the peasants and working classes, and it is from among the bourgeoisie, above all, that Ministers and party leaders are drawn.

Eastern Europe, with a scattered population, a recent civilization, a backward agriculture, very little industry and a quiet rudimentary economic life, where the soil constitutes almost the only wealth of the country, has remained under the mediaeval manorial system; the land is divided up into large proper-



## Aristocracy's Downfall

ties belonging to the noble families, on which the great majority of the peasants are either tenants or laborers. The castle dominates the village; the feudal lord, surrounded from childhood by swarms of servants and accustomed to being respected and obeyed, keeps the peasant in a state of fear and dependence. This social power, not being kept in check by the wealth or intellectual competition of a large bourgeoisie, renders the nobles supreme in the political sphere also; it is they who form the Court, the general staff, the Government, who hold the high command in the army, and fill the chief administrative posts. Raised by the favor of the ruling Prince above the masses of his subjects, they have upheld the monarchy by force of arms; the middle classes, few in number and kept in subjection, have had to rest content with junior posts and some measure of material profit. Such has been, with some variations, due mainly to the larger or smaller proportion of Jews, the agrarian and social order in Europe east of the Elbe.

### EIGHT LANDED ARISTOCRACIES

In this immense tract of country, where the manorial system held sway, one can count eight landed aristocracies: (1) in Russia, in the districts inhabited by Great Russians and in the Ukraine east of the Dnieper, the pomieshchiks, big landed proprietors whom the Czar, in superficial imitation of Germany, dignified with the title of noble; (2) in the Baltic provinces the "Baltic Barons," a stock of nobles of German origin superimposed upon the agrarian population of Esthonians and Letts; (3) in Rumania, the indigenous stock of Boyars, who remained in possession of their estates during the Turkish domination and intermarried with the Phanariot nobles sent into the country to exploit it in the name of the Sultan; (4) in Hungary, the Magyar magnates and "gentry," who have overflowed from the Magyar districts into those inhabited by Slovak and Rumanian peasants; (5) in Austria, the aristocrats of the Court of Vienna, who possess large domains in the German Alpine provinces and in the Czech lands

---

\* In "New Europe," July 14, 1910.



## Aristocracy's Downfall

of the Bohemian Crown; (6) in Prussia, the aristocracy of the eastern provinces, (Brandenburg, Pomerania, Prussia,) the Junkers, the "Rittergut" proprietors, who form the entourage of the King and the officers' corps; (7) in Poland, the *slachta*, the old fighting stock, which has become an aristocracy to which the greater part of the land still belongs, although the Russian Government, to weaken the national resistance of which the nobility was the soul, forcibly transferred part of the land to the peasants; (8) in the countries bordering on Poland, the former dependencies of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Lithuania, White Russia, Western Ukraine) and Galicia, the noble families descended from Polish immigrants or from the indigenous but Polonized big landowners, who today form an aristocracy of Polish language and manners, superimposed upon the indigenous agrarian population, (Lithuanians, White Russians, Little Russians, Ruthenes,) which has remained faithful to its own language, and—where it is of Russian origin—to the Orthodox Church (in Ukrainia) or the Catholic-Uniate Church, (in White Russia and in Ruthenia.) Of these eight aristocracies the Russian, the Rumanian, the Magyar, the Polish, and the Prussian, being of the same race as their peasantry, played the part of national leaders; the others, Baltic Barons, Austrian aristocrats, and Polonized nobles of Lithuania, White Russia, and Ukrainia, are foreign aristocracies in national opposition to their peasantry.

The war proved a decisive test of the stability of the two social orders; the democratic States went through it without flinching, the monarchies which had engendered the war in the hope of strengthening their position have gone under; from their defeat has sprung the revolution, which is overthrowing all aristocracies. One after the other is threatened or abolished by its subjects in revolt; and the political revolution is being completed by an agrarian revolution.

### BEGINNING OF THE REVOLT

This revolt began at the least civilized extremity of Europe—in the Russian



## Aristocracy's Downfall

Empire; the Bolsheviki, who attained to power by promising peace and the land, disorganized the armed force which alone, in that country of agrarian communism, maintained the class of large proprietors; the peasants, accustomed to feel themselves the legitimate possessors of their village lands, seized them by force from the nobles and proprietors. The new order is not yet stabilized; the land of which the large landowners have been robbed has not yet been divided among the peasants. But the counter-revolutionaries have been forced to relinquish all idea of re-establishing the old order, and to limit their hopes to an indemnity; the allied Governments themselves demand that the Generals should pledge themselves not to question the agrarian revolution.

In the Baltic countries, the Baltic Barons, supported by a German army of occupation, struggled for a long time to keep their political domination and their large estates; when driven out by the national revolt of the Esthonians and Letts, first from Esthonia and then from Livonia, they clung to Courland, where the ignorance and vacillation of the Allies had left a German army corps, which, on the pretext of policing the country against the Bolsheviki, in reality aimed at terrorizing the inhabitants to the advantage of the Baltic Germans. But now the order has at last come to evacuate Courland, and the *Revue Baltique*, the organ of the oppressed nationalities, writes as follows: "We had dreamed of peace between the Baltic peoples and the Baltic Barons. There is an end of that dream. Let the race of 'Balts' quit our soil, or we shall know how to tear it out ourselves." The end of the large domains is therefore near; the agrarian revolution is going to take place in the Baltic countries also. The peasant "have-nots" are going to receive their share of the native soil.