

WHAT THE SICILIANS WANT

(From an article by J. Hampden Jackson in the EASTERN DAILY PRESS, 20th July, 1943. Reprinted with acknowledgments.)

IF THE Allies can give the people of Sicily what they want, the whole course of popular revolt in enslaved Europe may be precipitated.

For once there is no doubt about what the people want. The Sicilians want land. They are not interested in political parties or in ideologies, they are not concerned about Fascist imperialism or even about Italian nationalism. They are a peasant people, most of them (58 per cent.) illiterate in 1918 and many of them illiterate to-day. They want land—the right to own the little lemon groves and olive groves and the mountain slopes where their goats pasture, and the right to work as their own the vast stretches where the great landlords have undertaken no cultivation at all. If the Anglo-American invaders can give them this, we shall be the most successful in the whole long list of conquerors who have laid violent hands on Sicily.

Sicily has been the most frequently conquered and the most consistently ill-governed of all parts of Europe. The Vandals, the Goths and the Byzantines, who in turn seized Sicily in the Dark Ages, left little but ruin behind them. It took a Northern invader to bring law and order to the ravaged island. The Normans, who conquered Sicily a generation after their conquest of England, established a strong centralised Government under Roger Guiscard and his son. Of all the races who have conquered Sicily, only the Normans were able to govern it, but their reign was brutal and short and they left no love behind them. In the thirteenth century a brilliant cosmopolitan civilisation was superimposed on Sicily, which was then the meeting place of the Christian and Moslem worlds and of Saracen, Greek, Lombard and Norman culture. But the Court of the Emperor Frederick II. had no roots, and the new conquerors who came to Sicily—first the Frenchmen of the House of Anjou, then the Spaniards of the House of Aragon, then the Frenchmen of the House of Bourbon—brought nothing but misery to the island.

The much-conquered and ill-governed Sicilians developed a passionate love of independence. Of all European peoples, only the Bohemians and the Swiss can compare with them in popular determination to live as an independent nation in medieval times.

Unlike the Bohemians and the Swiss, the Sicilians never knew success. Their revolt against the French in 1282, the bloody "Sicilian Vespers," was followed by a worse tyranny. It was not until the later part of the 19th century that independence came within their reach. In 1860 Garibaldi and his immortal "Thousand" landed at Marsala in the west, defeated the Bourbon troops at Calatafimi and marched on to occupy Palermo and Messina. But

the Sicilians' revolt under Garibaldi brought them nothing but a new tyranny. United Italy was a union of landlords and merchants. The Parliamentary regime was an oligarchy of property owners. The Sicilians were as far as ever from having what they wanted. They wanted land. In 1892 they rose in insurrection for it and were defeated. In 1919 they rose again and were again defeated; over 30 were killed and 100 wounded in the land riots during two October weeks. Then came the Fascist tyranny and the end of their hopes—until to-day. . . .

A generation or two ago, when the tyranny of landlords, merchants and usurers pressed hardest on them, and the countryman could get no living from his own rich island, the United States received Sicilians with open arms, as in very similar circumstances it received Irishmen. Sicilians came to look towards New York rather than to Rome for temporal salvation, as Irishmen came to look to New York rather than to London.

The United Nations have a great fund of good will to draw on in Sicily. But the fund will be frozen if we ever allow ourselves to forget what the Sicilians want. They want to own the land they work. And the same is true of the vast majority of Italians of the mainland from Calabria to the Romagna.

Italian rule did not bring the Sicilians the relief which they had hoped for. The island was divided up into huge estates among a few princely owners.

Even to-day the system of *latifondi*, by which the peasants have to work for these owners who live in luxury in Rome, is one of the problems of the Fascist Government.

Sicily in the olden days was one of the granaries of the Mediterranean; to-day she produces insufficient for her own needs, partly due to the large amount of grain which is used in the manufacture of *Pasti*, the main sustenance, with beans, of the population. The average meal of a Sicilian labourer is a roll cut in half and stuffed with beans. . . .

In 1937 it was officially stated that out of a four million population two-fifths lived in a single room for a family. Along the south coast may be found families living a community life in the huge caves cut out of the rock, herding with the mules, asses and chickens.

J. A. Sinclair Pooley in the *Sunday Graphic*, 11th July.

NELSON'S ESTATE IN SICILY.—"When Catania is captured, as it may be very soon (*Manchester Guardian*, 15th July, London Correspondent), "our troops advancing thence to the west of Etna will be on the soil given by the grateful King of the two Sicilies to Nelson. It is owned now by Lord Bridport, a former naval officer, who inherited the estate by way of Nelson's niece. Until

the war two English land agents were in charge of the estate, which includes the Brontè and other villages. The peasants there had in the past been on the best of terms with their successive English landlords. There was a time, indeed, when the Sicilian people started a movement to imitate the Maltese and ask for inclusion in the British Empire. That was when Ferdinand II. bombarded Palermo and Messina and flung many of the chief citizens into dungeons."

ITALIAN PEASANT SCENE

THE STORY of *Fontamara* ("Waters of Bitterness"?), by Ignatio Silone, published in 1934 by Methuen and Co. Ltd., London, is of the diversion of the stream which irrigates the peasants' village soil, in order to benefit the land of the local wealthy owner, and of the coming of the Blackshirts and the futile resistance of the peasants. We take the following from the Preface, which is dated 1930:—

"The soil reclaimed by the draining of Lake Fucino was among the richest in Italy, but its exploitation yielded no compensation for these losses. The district had been reduced practically to serfdom. The great wealth it yielded yearly did not stay where it was but emigrated to the Capital. A so-called Prince Tortonia owned the 8,000 acres of Fucino, together with a vast expanse of country in the Roman Campagna and Tuscany.

"This prince was the descendant of a certain Auvergnat named Torlogne, who came to Rome with a French regiment at the beginning of last century. First he speculated on the war, then he speculated on the peace. Then he speculated in salt. He speculated on the war of 1848 and on the peace that followed it, on the war of 1859 and the peace that followed it, he speculated on the Bourbons and he speculated on their downfall. After 1860 he succeeded in gaining control of a Franco-Spanish-Neapolitan company which had constructed the outlet for draining the lake. He bought the shares very cheaply. Torlogne, according to the privileges granted to the company by the King of Naples, should have had the right to the produce of the reclaimed soil for a period of ninety years. But in return for his political support of the Piedmontese dynasty, this privilege was extended to eternity and he was granted the title of duke and later that of prince. The Piedmontese dynasty gave him something they did not possess. . . .

"About ten thousand poor peasants work on the land. The so-called Prince Tortonia lets his land to barristers, doctors, solicitors, professors and wealthy farmers of the neighbourhood, who either sub-let or cultivate the soil themselves, hiring the poor peasants as day labourers. . . .

"There is a striking disparity between the wretchedness of the peasants and the enormous wealth Prince Tortonia draws yearly from the Fucino. The Fucino yields him annually