"Lebensraum" - Holland's Way and Hitler's

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There is an especially ironic note in the Nazi invasion of Holland. The Hitler sweep into the Netherlands serves to bring out in sharp relief a contrast between two antipodal methods of social conquest: one, the struggle of man against man; the other, the struggle of man against natural obstacles. The Nazis are seeking to enlarge their "Lebensraum" by wresting land from other peoples; the Dutch enlarged their "Lebensraum" by reclaiming land from the floor of the sea. The Zuider Zee project, on the way to completion when the military hordes swooped in from the East, is an epic feat of engineering and an eloquent testimonial to the civilized instincts of man.

It is perhaps worth while at this stage of history, when men through ignorance of the true laws of progress are striking out blindly and brutally in an effort to solve the problem of poverty, to picture this contrast and explain its significance. The Dutch example is a precept as well, though it is not likely that the example will be copied or the precept heeded by other nations until the energies of brute force have been fully spent and doctrines of enlightenment have taken their place as arbiters of social action.

As this is being written the fate of Holland remains unknown. But whichever way the tides of battle flow the fact will remain that when the Hollanders needed more living space they sought it in the undeveloped bounties of nature and not in plunder from fellow men. This is an old Dutch custom, for the Dutchmen have been expert in the reclamation of land for a thousand years. As a matter of fact almost half of this little country, which has a density of population that is exceeded by only one other nation (Belgium) lies below the level of
high tide water, while approximately one-fourth of her territory is under
neath the line of mean sea level; hence the famous system of dikes.

No less than 550,000 acres of fer
tile land would have been added to
the "Lebensraum" of Holland by com-
pletion of the Zuider Zee project.
The Zuider Zee was a large gulf of
the North Sea flanked on three sides
by lowlands. Much of it is now fer-
tile farmland cultivated like any
other agricultural area and settled
with farmsteads that to all appear-
ances might just as well be a thou-
sand miles inland instead of, as they
are, on the floor of the sea, from 13
to 16 feet below mean water level.

The problem of converting the
floor of a salt water sea into an
agricultural settlement was an
engineering one, noteworthy in itself;
but more important is the social
point of view which motivated it un-
der such circumstances. Population
pressure was a real problem in Hol-
land. With an area of only 12,692
square miles her inhabitants number
more than 8,500,000. The State of
Maryland, having an area of 12,300
square miles, is nearly as large as
the Netherlands, but it has less than
one-fifth the population (1,631,500).
The Dutch had the choice of reduc-
ing their standard of living, forcing
their people to overseas colonies,
begging the rest of the world for
help—or reclaiming land from the
angry North Sea. They chose the
last policy. Whether the virtue of
it will serve to bring its own reward
is now a matter of conjecture, for
the good work of the Hollanders will
be so much more booty for Hitler
if his Nazi machine is victorious.

Three hundred thousand people will
be settled on the one-time floor of
the Zuider Zee when all the recla-
mation work is completed. These
will not all be farmers or members
of farm families, for the settlement
program calls for the normal de-
velopment of villages and town ac-
tivities which complement agricul-
ture. Nor will the settlement of the land
be in the nature of a hit-or-miss proposition: sampling of the ocean
floor before the project was under-
taken subdivided which sections are
suitable for wheat growing, which
for truck crops, or for pasture or
for timberland. Thirty-four thou-
sand such samples established scien-
tifically the maximum usefulness
of each portion of the reclaimed area.

Of especial interest to those who
recognize the fundamental role that
land plays in economic and social
life is that provision had been made
to prevent these advantages from ac-
ruing to the benefit of land specula-
tors or monopolists. Though the
land was not to be thrown on the
open market, which of course would
be the only way to determine its
true value, the government had pro-
vided for the collection of an annu-
al rental which might correspond
roughly to the economic rent. Be-
going at $12 per acre this rental
was to be increased gradually in cor-
respondence with increased pro-
cutivity of the land until it reached
a maximum of about $21 per acre.
This procedure was not designed as
a permanent policy, but rather as a
method for retrieving the cost of
the project; data on hand do not in-
dicate whether with that goal achieved
the land was or was not intended to
become the private property of the
farmers who worked it.

It must be observed that this is
not strictly a land value taxation
procedure, but it should likewise be
noted that it recognizes one of the
basic principles of land value taxa-
tion, that land speculation retards
production. At least for some time
to come there could have been no
outright withholding of land from
production, though it is difficult to
see how private speculative profits
could be avoided when a uniform
rental is charged on land which de-
spite its uniformity is bound to dif-
fer in productivity, if not for rea-
sions of fertility, certainly for those
of site advantage.

Inasmuch as the Nazi invaders,
at this writing, have already reached
the Zuider Zee, which had no major
military protection, all discussion of
its social objectives must be tenta-
tive or purely theoretical. Hitler is
incapable of such a civilized con-
structive effort as the Zuider Zee
project; his leadership, from the
very start, has been devoted to de-
struction or preparation for destruc-
tion. One does not have to be a
follower of George or a believer in
land value taxation to recognize the
polarities of human character
brought out in this phase of the
war, i.e. the invasion of Holland. On
the one hand we see thrift and in-
dustry, on the other wanton waste-
fulness and a barbaric spirit of plun-
der. There it is, a lesson for the
whole world to learn: the two ways
to gain "Lebensraum"—Holland's and
Hitler's.