

# Landed Estates on the Mediterranean

By Raymond E. Crist

## Introduction

Land is a fundamental resource, and, together with climate, it has been the object of intensive study. But we should not too readily conclude that the number of people in a given region and their activities depend solely upon the qualities of the soil and climate. There is another very significant factor which has all too often been only very briefly considered or overlooked entirely, and that is, who owns the land. For example, Mexico is spoken on as a beggar nation sitting on a pot of gold largely because of the concentration of land in the hands of a few families. Abject misery for millions of peons has been the result. The entire history of the southern states of the United States differs markedly from that of the northern states, less because of differences in soil and climate than because of the growth of the plantation system before the Civil War and the development of the institution of sharecropping since that time. In Denmark it has been the policy of the government to distribute land as equitably as possible, in accordance with the principle that "very few should have more than they need and fewer still should have less than they need." As a result of this policy Denmark has become a country of prosperous small landholders, one of the richest agricultural nations of the world. Denmark has about the same soil and climate as East Prussia, yet the latter is rather sparsely populated by poor peasants because the land is concentrated in the hands of a few powerful Junker families. These marked differences in development between Denmark and East Prussia are due rather to the different systems of land tenure than to differences in soil, climate or race of people.

## Great Estates Common in Mediterranean Basin

Large landholdings are an important factor in the Mediterranean region. Sometimes they are of feudal

---

Dr. Raymond E. Crist, the author, is connected with the department of geology and geography, of the University of Illinois. This article appeared in the May, 1939, issue of *The Scientific Monthly*, organ of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, to whom we are indebted for permission to republish.

---

origin; others have resulted from the encroachment of great landlords upon either small individual or large communal holdings; still others are huge grants awarded to some successful military leader. In the Balkans the victorious Turkish chiefs appropriated great blocks of land, or "tchifliks," often merely ousting the Christian landlords. In Syria large estates are the rule, especially in the cereal country east of the coast ranges. In Algeria after the French conquest huge concessions were made to companies and to individuals, particularly during the Second Empire. Great landholdings, or "latifundios," are quite wide-spread in Spain, while in Sicily 1,400 estates comprise 30 per cent. of the total area of the island. Great holdings are prevalent in Italy, both in the Po Plain, where intensive agriculture obtains, and in the extensively farmed regions of southern Italy. Even in the French Midi large estates (over 10 hectares) are becoming general, taking up from 35 per cent of the cultivated land in the eastern Pyrenees to 50 per cent in l'Aude.

Unfortunately, great landholders are not, as a rule, convinced that noblesse oblige. Their estates are simply farmed extensively under the supervision of a resident manager, and, the owners being assured of ample income without risk and without effort, they make no attempt to increase production and thereby raise the standard of living of the miserable peasant. This has been true from one end of the Mediterranean to the other. It is easy to blame the climate or the "Latin temperament" for the growth of brigandage, the vendetta or the mafia, depending on the region, instead of

unemployment, very low wages and the consequent miserable living conditions for which bad harvests and the greediness of usurers have been largely responsible.

## Some Advantages of Great Landed Estates

Centuries of experience have taught the Mediterranean peoples that landholdings below a certain size are not stable in regions where harvests are likely to be uncertain because of droughts. Methods similar to those employed in modern dry farming were mentioned by Homer, Xenophon, Theophrastus and Virgil. Because of the immense amount of hand labor required before the advent of modern methods of mechanized agriculture, especially when cereals were the main crop, slavery was in vogue during ancient times, serfdom during the Middle Ages. By the fourth century, B. C., in the city-state of Athens, small landholdings were gradually acquired by rich money-lenders till large holdings were the rule. The history of European colonization in North Africa has conclusively proved that in those areas best adapted to the extensive production of cereals only large-scale holdings can survive. It is easy to draw parallels between such areas and our great wheat-producing states. North Africa might well be cited as an object-lesson to those who look with misgivings upon the development of vast machine-cultivated holdings in the Spring Wheat Belt of the United States. The rainfall, at all events, is independent of political systems, so, although 160 acres may support in comfortable circumstances one family—or even two—in the Corn Belt, the same is not true in the Wheat Belt—no matter how much wishful thinking be done.

## Large Landholders in Apulia

In southern Italy in the province of Apulia there are many great landed estates on which most of the work is done by day laborers. Here agriculture has the characteristics of the industrial undertaking for two reasons: (1) The amount of pre-

precipitation varies greatly from year to year, causing great fluctuations in total annual crop yields. Large estates can survive such uncertain conditions better than small holdings. (2) The agricultural products are for the most part not consumed locally; hence, they are subject to the vagaries of distant markets. Here again the margin of safety is not great enough for the small peasant.

#### Latifundios in Spain

The present system of land tenure in Spain dates largely from the time when the industrious Moors were expelled. Their land was confiscated and parcelled out in immense estates to the Catholic Church, to noble families and to army officers of high rank. The estates were really feudal fiefs, and the people living on them became serfs, attached to the estate. And as a result of the law of primogeniture, many of these estates have remained almost intact even to the present day, after more than 400 years.

In the course of centuries the great estate became a business enterprise on which a certain income was to be realized annually. Naturally the owner would prefer extensive cultivation of a crop that could be planted and harvested without high labor costs. No attention was paid to the needs of the people or to diversification of crops. One-crop farming was the rule. Formerly it was believed that latifundios represented only agglomerations of poor land. Surveys have shown this belief to be untenable. The province of Alicante has almost twice the population to the square kilometer (96) of the province of Seville (56). Both are equally fertile, but Seville is to a large extent in great landed estates. In Valencia, where small landholders prevail, the value of the yield of cultivated land averages 985 pesetas annually, whereas in the rich province of Seville, with its latifundios, the annual average is only 401 pesetas—less than half as much.

And now some statistics with regard to the extent of concentration of land in the hands of a few. Spain's three greatest landowners, the former archdukes of Medina, Penbranda

and Alba, control more than 420,000 acres, and the next five largest holders control more than 145,000 acres. Thus the eight largest landowners control more than 465,000 acres of the best farm lands in Spain. Twelve hundred families own more than 40 per cent of all the agricultural land in the country, and another 20 per cent is owned by 75,000 families. If this same condition existed in the United States, it would mean that approximately 7,500 immensely wealthy families would own almost one half the land of our country. And now I wish to show how this concentration of cultivable land in Spain in the hands of so few people has resulted in a terribly low standard of living for millions of peasants.

The great latifundios require few workers and then only at certain seasons. A limited range of crops gives rise to great seasonal fluctuation in employment. High wage rates may exist for the rush season, but the wage in no wise suffices to carry over a family to the next peak season. For this limited economy the owners of the immense estates have been to a large measure responsible and only under the Republic, after decades of social trouble and anarchy, have serious attempts been made to seek greater range of crops.

An added exasperation is that the seasonal demand may require importation of labor from far provinces, which gives rise to the anomaly that, in an area noted for rural unemployment, migrant labor must be called in. The three crops of Andalusia—cereals, olives and vines—give some spread of labor; but in Castile wheat and barley are the only crops, and even these vary enormously in yield according to the variations of rainfall. The plight of the rural laborer is pitiable in the extreme.

The English geographer, Mr. Dobby, in an article on "Agrarian Problems in Spain" in the April, 1936,



issue of the Geographical Review, gives a graphic picture of the distress of the laborers and the attitude of the landowners. I quote, "I recall an incident during a visit to an experimental pig farm in an out-of-the-way part of Andalusia. From the darkness at one end of the building came a red glow. I went along and found a laborer's family crouched on the floor round a twig fire with smoke so thick that breathing was difficult. The malodorous squalor contrasted with the carefully washed pig pens that I had been seeing. To my query an old woman mumbled: 'Yes, we live here. Worse than the pigs.' At which the owner beside me exclaimed indignantly: 'You have a roof over your head. What more do you want?'"

The consequences of the great landed estates have been: depopulation of the countryside, inefficient methods of farming, very low average wages, high rents, scarcity of live stock and a generally precarious economic situation for about a third of the country. In whole regions, as a result of a too rainy or a too dry season, a windstorm or a bumper crop with a consequent sharp drop in prices, the entire population may be reduced to the verge of starvation. Small wonder, then, that the people of this vast rural slum of Andalusia have for a half a century been ready to follow any political party—Anarcho-syndicalist or Socialist—that has promised speedy and sweeping agrarian reform.

One of the first acts of the new government, when the Republic was established in 1931, was to write the law of agrarian reform—formulated in September, 1932. The law defined the properties liable to expropriation, established cooperative societies and encouraged agricultural instruction. The breaking up of the estates was begun in 1932. Although the great landlords concerned, only 25,000 in the entire country, were to be paid off gradually in the course of a generation, they at once became bitterly hostile to the new government. The church property, valued at \$500,000,000, was nationalized in 1933. This act served to make the Catholic Church implacably hostile to the new régime.

But most of rural Spain still seethed with misery, and at last in February, 1936, general elections were held. The result was an overwhelming victory for the left Republicans and the workers' parties. With this tremendous showing of popular support, the new government felt justified in going ahead with land reforms. One of the first decrees of the Azana Government was that of February, 1936, which stopped payment of all indemnities which the preceding Right Government had granted the great landlords for their expropriated estates. In the first days of March, 1936, rural workers and tenant farmers returned to the lands allotted them by the first agrarian reform, which were taken away from them during the Right reaction of 1934-1935. Thus the Institute for Agrarian Reform noted that within a single week it had "installed" on the lands at its disposal 17,114 families of rural workers or tenant farmers. As a matter of fact these people installed themselves on the plots originally granted them which were subsequently taken away.

The large landholders were no longer allowed to continue keeping valuable land uncultivated. Much excellent land, for example, had been withdrawn from cultivation in the Guadalquivir Valley to be used as pasture land for the bulls destined to be killed in the bull fights. The new law made it compulsory to rent this land to the starving peasantry.

The breaking up of the great landed estates and the nationalization of the property of the Roman Catholic Church made the two most powerful elements in Spain deeply hostile to a government duly elected by a huge majority. The landlords and the clergy were willing to do anything to overthrow the government, even to the calling in of foreign mercenaries. But it is hard to see how a government can be stable if foreign troops are necessary to impose it on an unwilling people.

The system of slavery formed the material basis on which a flourishing culture was developed by the ancients, but once the iron grip of Rome was loosened the ancient world was precipitated into definite ruin,

and the Dark Ages intervened before another culture could come into being. "In speaking of Mediterranean civilizations it is necessary to distinguish, on the one hand, that which constitutes for them a durable, ever-valid basis from that which, on the other hand, has not been, in the history of human societies, but a unique and transitory success, the glamor of which should not mask the inherent defect."\* Franco's regime, once installed, may be a transitory success, but the inherent defect is that it will have been imposed by outside force. The land problem must either be solved or the population subjected to a modern Inquisition.

#### Conclusion

By way of conclusion allow me to quote the concluding sentences of my review of Pascual Carrion's great work on latifundios in Spain. This review was published in the April, 1936, issue of the Geographical Review. I quote: "All other problems in Spain fade into insignificance beside this one of agrarian reform. According as it is or is not satisfactorily solved, millions of people either will achieve a standard of living to which human beings are justified in aspiring or will continue to vegetate in illiteracy, misery, and squalor."

\* Charles Parain, "La Méditerranée, Les Hommes et Leurs Travaux," p. 209. Librairie Gallimard Paris, 1936.