

# Modern Feudalism at Work

By Dr. RAYMOND E. CRIST

The Balkan region, long notorious as the "cockpit of Europe," is characterized by a deep seated restlessness and instability. Turbulence, feuds and corruption are the heritage of centuries of Turkish misgovernment, and these evils have been accentuated by the conflicting Near Eastern policies of the Great Powers. In an attempt to analyze some of the developments in the Balkan area as a whole, let us examine a typical Balkan case — Yugoslavia, particularly the peasantry of Croatia and Dalmatia.

Before World War 1 the peasant in Croatia and Slovenia was a serf, bound to the soil; this serfdom (Kmetstvo) was abolished only after the war. In Dalmatia and Istria he was a share cropper; this system, with its familiar abuses, has by no means disappeared, in spite of laws passed to abolish it. In Bosnia and Herzegovina also the feudal pattern existed, but there the landlords were Moslems; Christians could be only serfs or free peasants. In 1915 there were 96,000 serfs, 151,000 free peasants and perhaps 10,000 landlords, and the free peasants were almost all Moslems. Here, too, serfdom was abolished after the war; but the agrarian reform was carried out in such a way that the peasant class was impoverished and the arable lands greatly reduced.

In the provinces of Slovenia, Croatia-Slavonia and Vojvodina there were 720 great landed estates with a total area of three million acres. A little less than half of this land was expropriated; most of it was given to the 300,000 families who were living on it at the time. Each family received about three acres. In addition, other settlers, including families of war veterans, received varying amounts up to about 18 acres. In Dalmatia the share-cropper system was abolished (at least on the statute books) and 97,000 families were given possession of the land they had long cultivated—125,000 acres, almost all of which was in very small plots planted in grapes.

With the war spreading to the Balkans, the future of Yugoslavia is rather dubious. Surrounded by treachery and faced with famine caused by this year's crop failure, she is in no position to resist Axis demands; but her worst weakness is her own economic mess.

Dr. Crist's paper is thus particularly timely. It appeared originally in more extended form in **THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY** for May, 1940, and we acknowledge gratefully permission to publish this condensed version.

The great feudal estates of Bosnia and Herzegovina were similarly divided up; the average family received about 12 acres.

Social conditions were largely responsible for these reforms. With years of war behind them and starvation staring them in the face, many peasants were ready to fall upon the great estates and divide up the land without benefit of government decree. The peasant war veterans who had become accustomed to the use of force heard vague rumors about what had happened in Russia and clamored for land in no uncertain terms. To these discontented classes the new govern-

ment threw land reform as a sop and gave the appearance of legality to what the peasants were ready to do violently. Little heed was paid to economic considerations, and the plots were often too small. Furthermore, the landlords were paid, at least in part, and they continued to live. After what had happened in Russia they were glad to preserve their lives and part of their prerogatives.

The peasants, on the other hand, derived little permanent benefit from the partitioning of the land, and their economy today is meager in the extreme. They seldom have meat to eat—animals, and often dairy products, must be sold for cash, and (if a buyer is found at all) in a buyer's market. At the little hotel in Krapinske a peasant was asking 15 dinar (30c) for a big fat duck, and was unable to sell it. The main food crop of Croatia is corn (maize) which grows well in the hot summers and can be raised with beans and pumpkins under a system of interculture, thus materially increasing the yield of foodstuffs per acre. In Dalmatia the main crops are wheat



From an Old Print

TAX COLLECTION TECHNIC  
Yugoslavia, 1940 U. S. A. (?)

and potatoes. Everyone eats as much as he can until about Christmas, when the supply begins to run low. During this season many peasants gain from 20 to 30 pounds. But then comes the season of lean meals, when the main dish for months is soup made of a kind of coarse cabbage. On this diet the peasant is able to keep alive till spring.

A great deal of wine was once made in Dalmatia, but the market has been hermetically sealed by the erection of high tariff walls. Furthermore, there are the taxes. Wine must pay a 10 % transportation tax if it is moved from the place where it was produced. The result is that less and less is made. Tobacco is a government monopoly, and a peasant must buy a permit in order to raise it. But since the cost of a permit is almost prohibitive, a great deal is grown illegally. The government seems to ignore the fact that trade brings wealth. By putting prohibitive taxes on many products it has driven the peasants to the most primitive self-sufficiency.

In some poor districts the tax collectors have stopped peasants coming from town and taken what money they had, since it was a foregone conclusion that every one had back taxes to pay. To avoid this the money was frequently given the children, who went home by circuitous routes. Most of the ready cash goes to the government, and the peasants have no money to buy manufactured goods. Matches may be an unheard-of luxury, and if the kitchen fire goes out coals must be obtained from a neighbor to start another. During 1932-1933 thousands of homes used no sugar or matches. Even though there was no market—or ridiculously low prices—for their hogs, sheep and other farm produce, a large part of the peasantry was chronically undernourished. A high percentage of those examined for the army are unfit, and the percentage of the fit decreases each year. The rate of infant mortality is one of the highest in Europe.

The small peasant is often driven to seek credit from the local money lender, whose rates are very high; the very fact that peasants will trust themselves to the tender mercies of

these loan sharks shows what a crying need there is for capital. Since the peasant often can not make enough to pay the interest, not to mention the principal, he soon finds himself in debt, working for his creditors instead of himself. This condition continues until his plot of land comes under the hammer in order to pay his debt. Then he joins the proletariat in the city or becomes a day laborer in his village. A great many peasants have met this fate, although they have attempted to defend themselves in many ways. Of these, one of the most important has been the development of collectives.

In former times there existed in Croatia a kind of patriarchal community organization of society. All the grown male members chose the *gospodar* or head man, who was vested with a great deal of authority but who could be removed as soon as the majority wished. (Now the authority of the *gospodar* has been assumed by the state, which is not so easily changed.) Socially the "*zadruga*" was a community bound together by blood ties; economically it was a collective. Long before the war there was a well developed system of these local cooperatives. Unfortunately, after the war many of them were captured by aggressive modern business men who managed them to their own narrow advantage. Despite this, the will to cooperation is still strong in the peasant, and membership in the cooperatives has grown steadily; they cannot yet, however, supply the leadership and capital that it was hoped they might, as in Denmark.

Taxes are one of the most oppressive burdens the peasant has to bear; they have remained fixed despite the steadily falling prices of agricultural products. The collectives tried to have them lowered. Attempts at negotiation with the central authorities were first made, but without success. Then the peasants simply refused to take their produce to market till the taxes were reduced. This had the desired effect in some areas, particularly in those where the officials had been selected from the locality. The peasants were not only successful in getting taxes lowered,

but they gained confidence in their collective strength as well. However, this action was less successful in the wine-producing areas of Dalmatia, where the officials are not chosen from the local communities, but are appointed in and come from Belgrade. They were not interested in local conditions or in trying to lower the taxes to a level at which payment would be at least remotely possible.

In short, Yugoslavia is in the process of internal Balkanization as a result of short-sighted government policies. In a half-hearted attempt to foster ownership of land by peasants, the government has destroyed security of tenure. The result is an uprooted peasantry, ready for any change that might again stick their roots into the earth that they have tilled for centuries.

## Connubiality Guaranteed

The House of Nissan in Japan is promoting marriages among its employees. Just another "welfare service" rendered employees by an enlightened employer!

The employees, it seems, "are wasting their most eligible years in the service of the company," and just don't have time to arrange their own marriages.

The newspaper account does not make it clear whether the prospective bride or groom need but send a post card (postage paid by the addressee), telephone (reversing the charge), or send a telegram (collect). But the service will be available with results, presumably, guaranteed.

Anyone who has gone out on a "blind date" may hesitate over an arrangement of that sort that may become permanent. But what's a poor working girl to do if she just doesn't have the time?

It appears that the Welfare Ministry has approved the project. One might ask, "Whose welfare?" But that might offend the sensibilities of the extremely courteous Japanese.

The plan is expected to increase the birthrate and help populate "a new order in East Asia." Our Asiatic cousins are apparently looking forward to a prolonged adventure in China.

—LLOYD BUCHMAN