

Prussia's Treatment of her Polish subjects

While the Balkan States, fighting for the cause of liberty against tyranny and persecution, are absorbing the attention of the world, another Slavonic people is the object of increasing severity at the hands of a government which calls itself Christian but which seems to have borrowed its methods from the Turk rather than to be inspired by the teaching of the gospel or guided by the principles of modern civilisation.

The wrongs of Poland in the past are familiar to all.

It is perhaps less known that under Prussian rule, especially since 1870, the Poles have been treated more and more as outcasts in their native land, — excluded from all public functions and employments, forbidden if they bought land to build upon it without special permission, difficult to obtain ; their children subjected to ill-treatment in the schools; their language prohibited at public meetings and in education.

Finally in 1908 a bill was laid before the Prussian diet by the prime-minister Prince Bülow, permitting the compulsory expropriation of Polish landowners, even though Prussian subjects, in favor of German purchasers. Without doubt all these vexations are largely due to the constant efforts made by certain societies the members of which are known as Hakatists, to germanise the Polish provinces and to drive out the Poles, — « uproot (*ausrotten*) is the word they use, — at the same time to secure an outlet for part of the surplus population of Germany without exposing it to the hardships of colonisation in distant or savage lands. To reach this end various means have been em-

ployed. Racial hatred has been fostered, the spark of religious fanaticism has been blown into flame, in order to obtain the legalisation of methods which nothing in the conduct of the Poles could justify or excuse.

Immediately an appeal was made by the celebrated author Henryk Sienkiewicz to eminent men of both hemispheres, asking their opinion as to the lawfulness of the proposed measure. From every country of the civilized world answers came, signed by hundreds of well-known men of every political party, who were unanimous in protesting against such an odious violation of the rights of man.

The bill was voted by a docile parliament; and now, after waiting some time for an opportune moment, the Prussian government has begun to enforce it. Four important Polish landowners have received official notice that they are to be expropriated by the State, — under cover of legality and in the interest of Prussian public welfare. Later it will be the turn of the peasantry to be dispossessed in order to make room for Prussian colonists.

The four million Poles living under Prussian rule are a peaceful, hard-working race, in great majority tillers of the soil. What are they to do, and where must they go when they are forced to sell their lands to German colonists or « Royal settlement committees ? » Must they follow the forty thousand Polish exiles driven from their homes during the past century ? Or do their oppressors hope to provoke acts of revolt, in order to have a pretext for more violent measures of repression ?

The Pole, passionately attached to the soil he cultivates, engrossed by his agricultural pursuits, might by degrees have become passively resigned to the oppressor's yoke. But his patience may have a limit if the Prussian government continues to enforce this unjust law.

In no English speaking country would such oppression be tolerated. England indeed has set a very different example by her generous treatment of those whom she vanquished in a recent war ; and the Polish expropriation bill cannot for a moment be compared with the sale of estates in Ireland, which benefits the Irish peasants themselves by enabling them to become owners of property

4

which they had held as tenants often from generation to generation.

« This is not a question of *reform* », says Henryk Sienkiewicz, « dictated by economic principles; it is simply an act of political oppression, an act which, even if committed to suppress an outbreak or punish a revolution, would still be unjustifiable; yet how much more so when it menaces a population which not only never attempted to revolt, but does not so much as demand autonomy, and asks only for equality before the law and respect for those sacred treasures, its language and its national customs?...

But above the Hakatist conscience there is the conscience of humanity at large, which has already spoken on this matter with no uncertain voice; there is the conscience of such Germans who think nobly and righteously; they too have not been dumb..... »

Public opinion, thanks to the appeal of Sienkiewicz, has already been instrumental in delaying the application of the law. Perhaps even now Prussia will reflect if a murmur of indignation makes itself heard in every civilized country.

Let lovers of liberty take up this cause with voice and pen !

Let orators of whatever party and preachers of whatever branch of religion speak out from tribune and pulpit against this course of oppression and injustice relentlessly pursued by the government of a powerful country against a helpless people!

