

# RADIO FREE EUROPE *Research*

## EAST EUROPE

Poland/9

23 April 1969

### THE FIRST YEAR OF LAND CONSOLIDATION

Summary: Fragmentary evidence indicates that, following the line laid down at the Ninth PUWP Plenum, the land consolidation program initiated in January 1968 is emphasizing expansion of the "socialist sector" at the expense of maximum rationalization of private farms.

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Atomization of private farmland has been a perennial problem of Polish agriculture, wasting arable land and the peasant's time and precluding application of fertilizer and mechanization of agriculture. Once opposed to integration of private land in view of what it believed to be the impending socialization of agriculture, the Party leadership legitimized discussion of the issue only four years ago, in response to pressure by agricultural specialists and the peasantry. At the Ninth PUWP Plenum in September 1967, the leadership affirmed that a program of land consolidation would be initiated. A few months later, in January 1968, the Sejm enacted a law on land consolidation and exchange; related provisions included offering aged peasants pensions in exchange for giving up their land and allowing the state to expropriate economically weak private farms.<sup>1</sup>

Authoritative statements by Party spokesmen prior to the enactment of the land consolidation bill strongly suggested that the Party had endorsed consolidation primarily not as a means to rationalize the area of private farms but rather in order to consolidate scattered plots of land held by the State Land Fund (taken over from abandoned farms or other sources) and utilize these consolidated

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1. Dziennik Ustaw No. 3, 1968. For background see ARJ, "Land Consolidation in Poland," Polish Background Report, Radio Free Europe Research, 19 July 1967; Marek Celt, "Another Round: Peasant and Party in Poland," East Europe, February 1968.

holdings through exchange to expand the area of existing state farms or to create new ones. Given the interspersed of private and "socialist" plots, the two aspects of "land consolidation" could never be separated completely; the issue is which approach would be given priority.

The announced results of the initial year of the program of land consolidation, taken with comments in the Polish press on the issue, support the above assumption, i.e., the Party has sanctioned the program primarily in order to expand the area of the "socialist" agricultural sector, mainly state farms.

While the precise figures in the Polish mass media are self-contradictory, during the year since the passage of the Sejm bill on land consolidation and exchange, some 200,000 hectares of land were consolidated, while roughly an additional 600,000 hectares (a figure apparently based on double counting) were "exchanged" -- meaning the trade of individual plots on a one-for-one basis with no attempt to place a larger area of land under a single owner.<sup>2</sup> According to a Radio Warsaw commentary, these operations took place primarily in regions where the State Land Fund had considerable unused reserves which, once consolidated, could be attached to state farms; "often" this involved taking away from peasants pieces of land which had been rented from the State Land Fund.<sup>3</sup> Glos Koszalin, the Party daily in Koszalin, noted that "the program of consolidation encompasses above all those villages and regions where state farms exist which are able to take over additional land."<sup>4</sup> According to Chlopska Droga, the Party semi-weekly for peasants, "the law on land consolidation and exchange was intended above all to bring about the division of the land of the State Land Fund into compact units and thus create suitable conditions for cultivation of this land by state farms and agricultural circles."<sup>5</sup> Another issue of the same publication<sup>6</sup> reported that in Bialystok Voivodship, four new state farms had been formed as a result of the land exchange program, while some enclaves of private land within state farms had simultaneously been eliminated.

2. Radio Warsaw, 29 January 1969. See Polish Situation Report/16, RFER, 26 February 1969. There is general agreement that some six million hectares of farmland should be consolidated. At a press conference of the Ministry of Agriculture on April 10 (Trybuna Ludu, April 16; Dziennik Ludowy, April 11) it was announced that 80 per cent of a planned 232,000 hectares of land had been consolidated in 1968; no figure for land exchange was given. Some 63,000 hectares were consolidated into "larger units," of which 51,000 hectares were transferred to state farms.
3. Polish SR/16, RFER.
4. Issue of 20 February 1969.
5. Issue of 10 December 1968.
6. 8 December 1968.



On the other hand, there is ample indication in the Polish press that land consolidation benefiting the peasant has to date received much less emphasis. According to Vice Minister of Agriculture Jerzy Popko, while in its initial months of operation the land consolidation program encompassed 700 villages, consolidation benefiting mainly peasants encompassed only 10 villages.<sup>7</sup> Zielony Sztandar, the Peasant Party semi-weekly, repeated the complaint, noted above, that in the course of land consolidation benefiting state farms, peasants were being deprived of plots of the State Land Fund which they had been given permission to cultivate.<sup>8</sup> Another paper voiced an additional complaint, namely that when involved in land exchange with the State Land Fund or a state farm, peasants were frequently forced to exchange a piece of land with better soil for one with poorer soil.<sup>9</sup>

In noting this trend, several authors have more or less directly argued that it is a negative one, that undue emphasis is being placed on expanding the "socialist" sector to the detriment of rationalizing private holdings. As an article in Dziennik Ludowy concluded: "Put an end to the harmful checkerboard [of plots], not to the peasants."<sup>10</sup> Approaching the problem from a slightly different point of view, a key article in Zycie Gospodarcze<sup>11</sup> maintained:

Great hopes for improvement of the agrarian structure are placed in the implementation of land consolidation plans. However, this problem awakens some concern. The location of the primary targets for consolidation suggests that the main, if not the only criterion here was the maximal, rapid return of costs connected with this project. As a result . . . regions with the greatest land fragmentation [regions where peasant farms predominate] have actually been shoved to the background. One can hardly agree with this. . . . Perhaps it would still be possible to make some corrections here.

It is still too early for even a tentative appraisal of the implementation of the provisions of the land consolidation bill related to pensions and expropriation. It should be noted that, so

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7. Rada Narodowa, 16 November 1968.
  8. Issue of 3 November 1968.
  9. Dziennik Ludowy, 22 November 1968.
  10. Ibid.
  11. Issue of 15 December 1968, translated in Polish Press Survey No. 2168, RFER, 9 January 1969.

far, there has been no indication that "economically weak" farms have in fact been expropriated. As for pensions, there has been at least one case, in Poznan Voivodship, where petitions from aged peasants to give up their land in exchange for pensions have been denied because there were no state farms in the vicinity which could absorb their land.<sup>12</sup> According to the Ministry of Agriculture, of some 15,000 petitions to exchange land for pensions in 1968, some 11,000 were examined and only 4,000 approved. The main reason for this low figure was said to be the fact that most of the peasants had attempted to give up land without farm buildings.<sup>13</sup>

To sum up, while it is too early to evaluate comprehensively the implementation of the land consolidation bill, it is clear that at present priority is being given to consolidation of plots which can be added to the "socialist sector." Some amalgamation of private plots has taken place, but this activity has to date clearly been given a much lower priority.

ARJ

12. Chlopska Droga, 10 Decmeber 1968.

13. Dziennik Ludowy, 11 April 1968; Trybuna Ludu, 16 April 1969.