

# Farming The Nation: Agrarian Parties and the National Question in Interwar Europe

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Agrarian parties played a key role in many European countries during the interwar period, particularly in Scandinavia, Central and Eastern Europe. Though quite heterogenous in almost every respect, they had enough in common to jointly found the Prague-based Green International or International Agrarian Bureau (IAB) (1921-1938).

Although their ideological foundations lacked the depth and coherence of other political families such as liberalism or socialism, circumstances obliged agrarian parties to elaborate lengthy discourses on nationalism and nation-building. The writings of leaders and thinkers in the vein of Milan Hodža, Antonín Švehla or Alexandr Stamboliski, as well as the *Bulletin* of the IAB, provide enough material for a discussion of their views on these matters. These debates were not merely theoretical because agrarian parties were constantly confronted with the national question, either as minority-based parties within multi-ethnic countries (for example the HSS in Croatia), or as mainstream parties bent on redefining the national identity of their countries in accordance with their (rural) values (for example the Bulgarian Agrarian Union or the *Parti Agraire et Paysan Français*). Another source of contradiction was their vision of countryfolk as the purest expression of national identity, which often made them hard to distinguish from strictly nationalist parties, together with their support of regional federations aiming at a European confederation.

**Keywords:** nationalism, agrarian parties, ruralism, pacifism, agrarian reforms.

## **Agrarian Parties: A Brief Introduction**

The historical importance of agrarian parties is often underestimated or even completely ignored in the grand narratives of twentieth-century European history. However, they were present in most European countries, with exceptions such as the United Kingdom and Portugal, though their characteristics and influence varied greatly. The first parties of this political family arose with the turn-of-the-century agricultural crisis, which also led to the appearance of agrarian cooperativism across Europe. Even before 1900, a number of parties were created such as the Danish *Venstre* (1888), the Bulgarian Agrarian Union (1889), the *Bayerischer Bauernbund* (Bavarian Peasant League, 1893), the *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* (Polish People's Party, 1895) in Austrian Galicia or the *Česká strana agrární* (Czech Agrarian Party, 1899) in Bohemia-Moravia. Others would follow in the years leading up to the Great War, but none would form a government prior to 1914, except in Denmark.

The interwar years were without doubt their golden age. Agrarian parties were present at one time or another in the governments of every Nordic country, the three Baltic States, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and the Helvetic Republic, to which could be added the occasional inclusion of regional agrarian parties in coalition governments in the Weimar Republic.<sup>2</sup> The proliferation of right-wing authoritarian regimes and then communist dictatorships in the Soviet sphere of influence marked the end of this golden age, albeit agrarian parties still exist with marginal political weight in several countries.

Agrarian parties were a heterogeneous family by any standard. From an electoral point of view, they ranged from those capable of forming single-party governments, as was the case in Bulgaria and Romania, to minuscule formations like those in Belgium and the Netherlands that had

to fight even to gain parliamentary representation. The majority seduced somewhere between 10-15% of the electorate, which allowed them to form coalition governments in places like Scandinavia and Czechoslovakia. With regards to their position on the ideological spectrum, the Bulgarian Agrarian Union fell on the extreme left, but most Western European parties leaned the other way, such as the *Partido Agrario Español* (1934-1936), whose *raison d'être* was to oppose the agricultural reforms of the Second Republic, or the *Parti Agraire et Paysan Français* (PAPF, 1927-1939) with its ambiguously structured criticisms of parliamentarism under the Third Republic. In general terms, support for agrarian parties was more precarious and their position on the ideological spectrum was more right-wing the further west one went, which has had an impact on their treatment at the hands of historians, since broad surveys of European History tend to be written by Anglophone authors.

Despite everything, these parties had enough traits in common to be recognised as a single political family. These traits include the defence of the agricultural sector, particularly smallholders; links to agrarian associations; an identification with parliamentarism; foreign policy marked by pacifism; anticommunism etc. Also relevant were the mutual links they forged with each other, such as the harbouring of Bulgarian and Polish agrarian refugees by the Czechoslovakian Agrarian Party in times of repression, or the circulation and translation of books and periodicals. Personal connections also played their part, as can be seen in the presence of agrarians from different countries as attendees at other parties' congresses, or the Bulgarian Alexandr Stamboliski's tour of several capitals after signing the Treaty of Neuilly in Paris, throughout which he was given what could almost be called a star's welcome.<sup>3</sup> The eventual culmination of these connections was the existence between 1921 and 1938 of a coordinating body, the International Agrarian Bureau (IAB), also known as the Green International, with its

headquarters in Prague, of which twenty-one parties from across the continent were members at one time or another.<sup>4</sup> As a prerequisite for admission into the IAB, a party had to conform to a sixteen-point programme, drafted in 1929, which included pacifism, parliamentarism, cooperativism etc. Taking all of this into consideration, it seems reasonable to analyse agrarian parties as a transnational phenomenon.

The historical role of agrarian parties reached its apogee just as the national question was brought into focus by the collapse of multi-ethnic empires after the First World War, the drawing of new borders via peace treaties that, in theory, respected distinct nationalities, and the official acknowledgment of the existence (and rights) of national minorities by the League of Nations. Therefore, it is pertinent to consider the positions taken by agrarian parties in the face of the national question, multiple iterations of which weighed heavily on interwar Europe. This article aims at offering a summary of the available state of knowledge through secondary literature and primary sources, as well as some hypotheses for further research on the subject.

## **Some Conditioning Factors**

Unlike other political families, in the case of agrarianism there is no significant theoretical corpus that could serve as a framework for a developed system of ideas and guidelines to manage the endless complexity of human affairs. There is nothing that even comes close in scope or quality to Marx's works on socialist parties or John Locke and Adam Smith's writings on liberal ones, to name a few examples. The positions of agrarian parties regarding the national question must be inferred from their actions and from sources such as the *Bulletins* published by the Prague Green International and its successor, the International Peasant Union (founded in 1947 by exiles in the USA),

articles printed in party newspapers, and books and memoirs penned by a number of agrarian leaders and theorists of note. Chief among the latter are the writings of the Bulgarians Alexandr Stamboliski and Giorgi M. Dimitrov, the Czech Antonín Švehla, and the Slovak Milan Hodža. The second of these authors had no qualms in pointing out in 1948 that

‘[...] agrarianism does not yet possess a systematic doctrine of fundamental principles or a coherent philosophical structure of values... is a practical rather than a theoretical ideology; its doctrine is being developed gradually on the basis of practical experience.’<sup>5</sup>

To this must be added a level of anti-intellectualism that did not help to attract theorists who might have been capable of articulating a true doctrine in all its complexity. Schoolmasters, local intellectuals, agricultural engineers, vets etc. were all to be found in the milieu of agrarian parties, often in positions of authority within the organisation. In other words, these were people who had undergone some form of training but whose knowledge had immediate practical applications. Seldom were they intellectuals in the sense of thinkers who moved in the realms of ideas and abstraction. One exception was the Romanian functionalist and political scientist David Mitrany (1888-1975), a Romanian Communist Party sympathiser and author of a refutation of Marxism from an agrarian perspective.<sup>6</sup> In any case, and as has already been mentioned, agrarian parties’ production in the field of theory as well as their trajectories in a practical sense allow us to reconstruct their interactions with the national question. These were conditioned by a series of factors that are outlined below.

Firstly, the national question did not initially form a central part of the worldview of parties which, to use Lipset and Rokkan’s terminology, the cleavage of city versus countryside had brought into being.<sup>7</sup> When the

conditions that gave rise to specific agrarian parties are examined, it is obvious that national problems were secondary or completely negligible at the moment of their founding. Some, like the Czech agrarian party, splintered off pre-existing liberal formations, while others like the Swedish and Bulgarian ones were autonomous creations, but as a general rule the representation of the interests of an agrarian sector that felt itself to be side-lined by established parties was the clear priority. This did not stop them from having to align themselves in response to national questions, whether that was because they acted in the context of multi-ethnic states (see the Croats and Czechs in the Hapsburg Empire) or because said questions were closely linked to agrarian concerns. This is what occurred in the case of agrarian reforms through which parties aimed to extend family ownership over smallholdings. In places where land ownership was drawn along ethnic lines, a confluence of agrarian and national questions was inevitable, for example wherever a majority of large landowners were of a different group to that of the peasantry (Germans in the Baltic countries and Bohemia-Moravia, Hungarians in Transylvania, Poles in the mostly-Ruthenian areas of Austrian Galicia etc.)

Another factor to take into account is that relations between agrarian and nationalist parties were not always easy.<sup>8</sup> This may seem surprising given that both coincided in exalting the rural world and the peasantry, which for nationalists were the purest expression of a nation's identity and the most stalwart guardians of its traditions. The editorial of the first number of the *Bulletin* of the Green International claimed that agriculture was the basis of civilization and thus eternal, while any other institution or social reality could change. This resulted in the peasant being 'the main stone of the structure of human societies and the base of the idea of nation and State. Therefore, the man living upon his land is and must be the creative element within the State (...) Healthy and land-

toiling men are a reservoir of national energy, necessary for curing the exhausted mankind.<sup>9</sup>

Or, as expressed immediately after the Second World War while trying to reconstruct the Green International in the U.S.

“The earth is the source of life and from it spring the main human opportunities. The entire existence of a nation organised in a state depends on its ties with the earth. The weaker these ties, the sooner comes moral and physical degeneration of individuals and groups (...) The moral regeneration of the world will be achieved by Peasant Movements, so closely connected with the earth. Their ripening into political maturity will put an end to the economic chaos and clear the stagnant atmosphere of the industrial centres. The mentality that was formed in everyday contact with the primeval laws of the earth will straighten the tortuous social thought of modern times.’<sup>10</sup>

Despite all this, nationalists did not tend to approve of parties which, apart from anything else, competed with them for the support of a social group that they considered to be their natural base from which to make the leap to become a mass party. In extreme cases, an agrarian party could be so successful in the electoral arena that it could end up unseating nationalist parties from their majority position, as happened in Croatia. Secondly, agrarians threatened to divide the *national community* that nationalist parties sought to represent by leaning on the support of only one sector of the population, albeit a highly numerous one. Lastly, agrarian parties’ policies could enervate the national cause by focussing on practical issues like land ownership or fair prices for agricultural products instead of national rights. Furthermore, their proposals could pit different social groups against each other (large landowners against settlers, settlers against day labourers, farmers

against merchants...), while nationalists emphasised external causes in their analysis of social and economic problems.

Nowhere was this clearer than in Ireland, where nationalists were wary of cooperativism for the reasons stated and, by throwing in their lot with the Land League, simplified the local situation into a standoff between two apparently united fronts: Irish Catholic peasants versus English Protestant landowners. Of course, beneath all this broiled conflicts of a less diaphanous nature, like that of small landowners and leaseholders against day labourers, the problem of usury or the tensions between livestock and crop farmers. For nationalists, any solution to these 'secondary' problems (hardly secondary to those who experienced them) would have to be put off until the primary aim of independence could be achieved. Only after the creation of the Free State in 1922, when blame for disillusionment with the new order of things could no longer be placed at the feet of the British, did the Farmers' Party (1922-1932) appear, focussing on the interests of the more prosperous producers to the east of the country, and then *Clann na Talmhan* (1938-1965), which aimed to represent the poorer peasantry, especially in the western counties.<sup>11</sup>

The territorial implantation of these parties was another conditioning factor. Some of them had a regional character, like the Bavarian *Bayerischer Bauernbund*, Swiss agrarian parties from German-speaking cantons, the Walloon *Parti agraire belge* or the *Bund der Landwirte*, founded by the German ethnic minority in the First Czechoslovak Republic. However, they were more commonly state-wide parties with enormous variations in their level of support depending on the region, with the lion's share of their backing limited to certain strongholds, while they barely garnered any votes in other areas (which of course included urban areas). Thus, in the abovementioned case of Ireland, the first party to be created (the Farmers' Party) championed the cause of the wealthier peasants and failed to gain support from the poorer peasantry to the

south and west of the island. The pattern of support for *Clann na Talmhan* was the other way round, though on paper both it and the Farmers' Party operated across the whole country. To a large extent this reflected the diversity of agrarian structures and, looking towards Central and Eastern Europe, ethnic diversity as well. This was to condition parties' positions in debates over the structure of the state, with a general tendency to favour decentralising or federal formulas and a consistent opposition to centralism.

In relation to this last point, it is significant that agrarian parties were only rarely multi-ethnic constructions, or at least their ethnic makeup was not proportional to the demographic composition of their respective countries. In Central and Eastern Europe they were usually divided along ethnic lines, in the same manner that the cooperative movement was.<sup>12</sup> In multi-ethnic contexts, even though they were more open to dialogue than most other political groups, agrarian parties never managed to incorporate the rural populace equitably with no regards paid to linguistic or religious differences. There was a Croatian, a Serbian, and a Slovene agrarian party in interwar Yugoslavia, and though they reached occasional agreements, they never joined forces to become a unitary movement. In Czechoslovakia, the pre-existing Czech and Slovak agrarian parties fused in 1922 to form the RSZML (*Republikánská strana zemědělského a malorolnického lidu* – Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants), which went on to become the most voted party in the First Republic. Nonetheless, German minority farmers were represented by their own party (*Bund der Landwirte*, 1920), as were the Hungarian and Ruthenian minorities, each of which had a small agrarian party that acted in their name.

In the rhetoric of agrarian parties, two images that moulded their positions regarding this issue can be detected. The first is the frequent identification of the peasantry or the rural population in a broad sense with the 'people' as a whole, or at least with its most sound and

representative part. The Croatian HSS leader Vladko Maček (1879-1964) could thus exalt Ante Radič, founder of the party along with his brother Stjepan, attributing to him the 'merit [...] of having been the first to declare that the Croatian people and the Croatian peasantry are one and the same, which means that if a political struggle is to be successful, it must count upon the organised majority of the nation of Croatia', whereas all remaining social groups had servilely adopted the ideas and mentalities of other peoples.<sup>13</sup> Such a metonym was not infrequent, most notably wherever a strong anti-urban sentiment reared its head, like in Bulgaria. Absentee large landowners, the working class, and civil servants were symbolically excluded from the national community because they were contaminated by foreign influences and, on top of that, were considered parasites that fed off the true generators of wealth, i.e. the agricultural sector. This metonym could pave the way to a populist rhetoric and grand claims of speaking for the nation as a whole. As is logical, this was easier to achieve in places where the peasantry represented a majority of the population, which was still common in the twenties and thirties. An expression of this is the fact that sometimes these parties would call themselves *popular* parties, with no allusion to their peasant, rural or agrarian character, since it was understood that *people* meant countryside. So, when in 1931 three Polish agrarian parties came together in a singular formation, the name chosen was *Stronnictwo Ludowe* (SL), People's Party, without it being seen as necessary to clarify who exactly constituted the 'people'. When it came to the *Bălgarski Zemedelski Narodni Săjuz*, Bulgarian Popular Agrarian Union, the name even sounded reiterative.

The other image is a metaphor. Agrarian parties were distinct from the parties of liberal and conservative notables that had dominated the political scene as mass parties in most of Europe up until the Great War. This was principally due to their links with cooperatives, and additionally associations for women, agricultural technicians, students,

sport or cultural organisations, as well as local and national press outlets. Such connections with civil society gave them a solid foundation, a source of future party leaders and, in periods of repression, a place of refuge where members could await a return to normality. In the most consolidated parties, party members and voters strengthened these links through day-to-day activities like selling their products in a cooperative, reading a particular newspaper or participating in common leisure pursuits. These quotidian associations recreated Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities' by offering a channel through which the desired agrarian national community could be embodied.<sup>14</sup> The local community as a metaphor for the national community, as theorised by Anderson, here manifested itself in a way that was far more direct and noticeable than what can usually be observed.

### **Agrarian Parties, National Matters: Some Patterns**

When examining dozens of parties along the length and breadth of the continent, each with its own idiosyncrasies, and their interactions with an issue as complex as the national question, the debates around which varied from country to country, it becomes necessary to attempt some degree of classification. Greater clarity is gained by doing this, though with a trade-off in the form of simplification.

Four conditioning factors and three state models define the system of classification. The former are:

- a) The percentage of the active agrarian population in a given country
- b) The distribution of land ownership and the dominant modes of access to landed property for farmers
- c) The relative strength of the agrarian party in electoral terms

d) How far national identity is questioned or debated at the state level

The three state models would be: a) countries where national identity is unquestioned, b) countries where national identity is questioned and the agrarian party aligns with an ethnic minority, and c) the same, but agrarian parties represent the interests of the majority group. In those countries where national identity is not an object of debate, agrarian parties assume said national identity as their own but work to integrate elements of their particular worldview into it. Their success depends on their electoral weight and that of the local agrarian population, among other things. Historically, this strategy did not exert a destabilising influence because in general nationalisms had a strong rural component to them, so agrarian revindications were no more than a question of emphasis. In countries where they represented specific areas with a differentiated regional character, they leaned towards regionalist positions, but in the sense of a 'regional pride' that would ultimately reinforce national identity.<sup>15</sup>

The French, Danish and Bulgarian cases are illustrative. The *Parti Agraire et Paysan Français* was founded in 1927 and was able to feed upon the malcontent caused by the Great Depression and the perceived disinterest of the Third Republic's governments towards agrarian groups in relation to other sectors of society. It directly criticised the flaws of the regime and promoted decentralising and corporatist reform.<sup>16</sup> Its activities peaked around 1936 but soon after the death of its founder, the journalist Fleurant Agricola, it was split by personalisms and political alliances, particularly the clash between supporters and detractors of collaborating with Henri Dorgères' more radical *Comités de Défense Paysanne*.<sup>17</sup> Symbolically, the PAPP's flag consisted of a green background with the tricolour to the top left; the PAPP touted its French patriotism but insisted on placing the contributions of the rural world in the foreground. As such, Fleurant Agricola revindicated 1789 as a

peasants' revolution, 'which thanks to the energy of its peasants had brought ideas of liberty to the whole world'.<sup>18</sup> In each party congress, a wreath was laid beside the monument to the fallen in the First World War as a reminder that it had been the peasantry who had made up the majority of casualties and shown the most striking loyalty to the fatherland.<sup>19</sup> The backing of agrarian sectors that was demanded from the state was based on the idea that the most authentic expression of French identity was to be found in villages, as well as the fact that national produce would prove fundamental for national self-sufficiency in the event of another war.

The Danish *Venstre* could be considered a success story in this category, with the difference that the reformulation of national identity happened before its creation but then worked to the party's benefit. After Denmark's defeat in the Second Schleswig War in 1864 and the consequent shrinking of its territory, the country was forced to carry out a revision of its history and values that was underpinned by pastor N.F.S. Grundtvig's movement of religious reform.<sup>20</sup> Starting in 1888, the *Venstre* became the political expression of popular schools, the cooperative movement, and pro-peasant historical and cultural revisionism in the wake of the failures of the bourgeoisie and traditional elites. Afterwards, it managed to hold a significant level of political influence even as the active agrarian population progressively declined.<sup>21</sup>

Most agrarian parties were of a small or medium size and so were never well positioned to impose the entirety of their interpretation of a dominant national identity upon the rest of the population. The most they could aspire to was for rural values to be given the level of recognition they deserved within said identity, or what the party judged to be the level they deserved. The situation would be completely distinct in a country where the peasantry still represented the majority of the population, meaning that their support would grant an agrarian party a

parliamentary majority. Moreover, this is not a hypothetical scenario because it is exactly what occurred in Bulgaria between 1919 and 1923. In the chaos of humiliating defeat, territorial losses and economic disaster that followed on the heels of the Great War, the charismatic Alexandr Stamboliski's (1879-1923) Agrarian Union came into its own as an alternative to the disgraced traditional parties and monarchical power in a country where three quarters of the population lived off agriculture. In this case, the agrarian party in question did not intend to add nuances to the definition of national identity, but rather believed that its absolute majority in parliament would allow it to substantially remodel the definition and impose it on everyone else. For the duration of his 'agrarian dictatorship', as Western diplomats were wont to call it, Stamboliski clashed with multiple social and political groups over his revolutionary policies. Among other measures, his government enforced periods of mandatory labour to familiarise young people with the virtues of agricultural work. With rhetoric characterised by a style of anti-intellectualism not unusual among agrarian politicians, Stamboliski also clashed with Sofia University over his plans to reform the Cyrillic alphabet to make it more accessible to the lower classes, which would facilitate his pro-literacy campaigns and indirectly increase mass participation in politics.<sup>22</sup> Whereas Bulgarian identity had been built on hostility towards Turks and Greeks as the *other*, Stamboliski headed a pacifistic foreign policy that meant renouncing ideas of revanchism, accepting the territorial losses enshrined in the Treaty of Neuilly, and making efforts to establish neighbourly relations with surrounding countries, including Yugoslavia in spite of the explosive Macedonian question. All of this led to the definition of national identity swinging away from ethnic elements towards civic ones, for which reason the Agrarian Union's programme recognised the need to respect minorities (Greeks, Jews, Turks...) and their right to schooling in their own languages.<sup>23</sup> The caveat was that these civic values were founded upon an extreme pro-rural ideology, a worldview theorised by Stamboliski

himself according to which humanity was not stratified by class as Marxists claimed, but split into professional or corporative groups, among whom those who worked the land were the essential and indispensable caste upon which everyone else depended. Stamboliski's attempt to remodel Bulgarian society from top to bottom ended when a multi-sector coalition was formed against him by the crown. In 1923, a bloody coup put an end both to his government and his life.

In those countries where national identity was contested, two possibilities were open. Firstly, an agrarian party might identify with one of the minorities within that state. If such a party managed to gain a predominant position in its zone of influence, then it would become something very similar to a nationalist party, as was the case of the Croatian Peasants' Party (*Hrvatska seljačka stranka*, HSS), which displaced all other Croatian parties. Despite enjoying only minor electoral success prior to 1918, the HSS was the most-voted formation from that year onwards, becoming the paladin not only of the Croatian peasantry but of all Croats in the struggle against Belgradian centralism, the overwhelming presence of Serbs in state apparatus, fiscal aggressions etc. It oscillated somewhat when it came to specific issues, but its acceptance of the political system always hinged upon the adoption of federal structures as a bare minimum.<sup>24</sup> In any case, the most significant point here is that Belgrade perceived Stjepan Radić not to be the leader of the Croatian peasantry, but the supreme representative of Croats across the board. And this was true regardless of whether it entailed repression (Radić endured several stretches of prison time for not obeying the Constitution of 1920) or negotiation, such as when the Radical Party agreed to form a coalition government with him in 1925.

The programmes of agrarian parties that represented the dominant group in multi-ethnic states tended to be less nationalistic in their policies than other parties. Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that they proved themselves capable of reaching agreements with parties

that represented minorities, in particular, though not exclusively, other agrarian parties with which they might share a good portion of their social and economic proposals. The most obvious example is the Czechoslovakian Agrarian Party, with representation in all the governments of the First Republic and almost constant control over the post of prime minister. It was this party, or more exactly its leader Antonín Švehla, that orchestrated the entry of German minority parties into the coalition government of 1926. This was a brave step towards the integration of this minority into the new state, yet the process would eventually break down with the economic crisis and the rise of the Sudeten German Party in the thirties.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it is relevant that the agrarian party was the only one to oppose the expulsion of the German minority on the principle of collective guilt after Czechoslovakia was reconstituted in 1945.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, in Yugoslavia, the only Serbian party that was open to negotiating decentralising solutions and kept amiable relations with the Croatian peasants' party was its agrarian equivalent, the *Zemljoradnička stranka*.<sup>27</sup> These experiences gave some credibility to Milan Hodža's (agrarian Slovak leader and Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia in 1935-38) claim that in interwar Central-Eastern Europe 'agrarian democracy' was the best path towards solving the minority problem".<sup>28</sup>

Just one year before the dismemberment of his country, the leader of the Czechoslovakian Agrarian Party, Rudolf Beran, proclaimed in the daily organ of his party that they were 'resolute nationalists', but open to peaceful agreements both internationally and nationally regarding minorities. After invoking the usual chants to peasants as the most patriot class because they tilled the land, felt a personal connection to it, and fed the rest of the population, Beran assured that peasants would guarantee the survival of the state. That was not to be, scarcely a year later Beran was the PM of the Second Czechoslovakian republic

immolated in the Munich agreement, as a symbol of the limits of agrarian parties in the broad scenario of *Realpolitik* in the 1930s.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusions

Nationalism was not a part of what may be called the true nucleus of agrarian parties' ideology. Studying the circumstances of their creation, it can be appreciated that these parties were born either as an emanation of pre-existing associative movements or as splinter parties of already established formations whenever it became apparent to wide social sectors that their interests were not well represented by them. In fact, at many points along their trajectories, agrarian parties were accused of only servicing the practical concerns of their voters without professing any solid ideals and principles. As such, they were able to deal with parties of differing ideologies in exchange for concessions (the lowering of taxes, tariffs on imports, systems to guarantee minimum prices for agrarian produce...), all of which was the worst kind of political horse-trading in the eyes of their detractors. Another interpretation is that these parties became a factor of stability in the convulsive Europe of the interwar years because they facilitated the consolidation of coalition governments, although that is not the topic studied here.

Even if the national question was not decisively present, changes in the situation could lend it more weight later on and turn it into a priority. This happened in those regions where there was notable ethnic opposition between landowners and peasants, such as in Estonia.<sup>30</sup> Alternatively, a party's success could lead it to monopolise the votes of a certain minority within a state and transform itself into that minority's maximum interlocutor with the holders of power, like the previously cited Croatian HSS. In this sense, it seems reasonable to second Alex Toshkov when he writes of the 'contingency of national expression' for

these parties, which was not a part of their essence but did manifest itself with greater or lesser intensity according to the context.<sup>31</sup> In multi-ethnic societies, and few societies in Europe were not multi-ethnic at least to some extent, the land question, for example, unavoidably became intertwined with the national one. In the proposals for agrarian reform that were made after the First World War, set down by agrarian parties in positions of government or supported by them from the benches of the opposition, ethnic factors counted as much as or more than economic factors, so that selected groups were favoured (generally to the detriment of Hungarians and Germans) in the expropriation of property and the apportioning of settlers. The justification for this lay in the avenging of ostensible historical grievances and the creation of a peasantry that identified with the new nation-states born from the ashes of fallen empires, since it was these nation-states to which they owed their access to the land.<sup>32</sup>

Another important question is what constituted the idea of nation that to a greater or lesser extent these parties disseminated. Making use of the ethnic/civic dichotomy, though this has been criticised, at first glance it appears that ethnic elements were clearly dominant given that the cultural expressions emanating from agrarian parties extolled folklore, traditional know-how etc.<sup>33</sup> Both the agrarian party press and writers who were sympathetic to their cause favoured a costumbrista style of literature that focussed on the countryside or on historical events in which rural folk virtues (patriotism, frugality, solidarity, ingenuity...) could be highlighted. Nevertheless, the praxis of agrarian parties did introduce civic elements via their defence of parliamentarism, universal suffrage (for women and men), clean elections, the fortifying of civil society through associationism... all of which in many countries meant making the jump from liberalism to democracy. In this way they made a considerable contribution towards opening up spaces for civic

participation and citizens' mobilisation, thus indirectly fomenting nation-building processes.

It could be argued that the aforementioned initiatives were carried out on the assumption that the weight of the rural population in the electorate as a whole would affect a country's society, culture, and politics at all levels. Stamboliski's Bulgaria was the place where this ambition came closest to being realised. Through the reproduction of a national identity tailored to fit the interests of the peasantry and with which they could easily feel identified, agrarian parties (especially in Central-Eastern Europe) helped to erode the phenomenon of 'national indifference' that disproportionately affected the rural masses.<sup>34</sup>

The ability of agrarian parties to pivot towards openly nationalist positions under determined circumstances was to be confirmed in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. During the brief transition between the retreat of the Axis armies and the imposition of communist regimes in the Soviet sphere of influence, agrarian parties adopted a new role in representing a firm obstacle to the communists' seizure of power because they managed to attract electoral backing that went beyond their natural base of support. This was achieved precisely by agglutinating nationalist, anti-Russian sentiment and the votes of many Poles, Hungarians, Romanians or Bulgarians who had little or nothing to do with the countryside and agriculture.<sup>35</sup>

A consistent trait among agrarian parties was their approach to foreign policy, based on pacifism and the building of confederal structures in preparation for a hypothetical European confederation.<sup>36</sup> And though that could sound like mere rhetoric, there is factual evidence to demonstrate that this was not the case. Agrarian parties opposed their countries' military adventures whenever feasible, just as they did with the non-negotiated reshuffling of borders. Stamboliski stands out once again as the most obvious paradigm of such convictions, although it is

also worth mentioning some agrarian parties that worked together despite the tense relations that existed between their countries, like the cooperation between Bulgarians and Serbs or Poles and Czechoslovakians.

Diverse supranational schemes were managed through rural organisations, both in the interwar years and among exiles during the Second World War, although the division of Europe after Yalta and Potsdam doomed them to be little more than empty gestures. The Prague Green International was represented in several Europeanist projects, such as Coudenhove-Kalergi's Paneuropean Union, as well as multiple international organisations with or without ties to the League of Nations (the International Labour Organisation, the International Institute of Agriculture etc.). Europeanism was built on the notion, which can often be seen in contemporary speeches and publications, that peasants had a great deal in common and instinctively understood each other regardless of how many borders divided them, and as such it was necessary to reject war and xenophobia.<sup>37</sup> From a national perspective, this is certainly one of the most constructive facets of these parties. Lastly, as a general consideration, it can be recalled that agrarian parties did not promote the authoritarian nationalist regimes that proliferated in interwar Europe, but rather were victims of repression under them.

The balance is less favourable on other points, such as the abovementioned difficulties in reflecting states' multi-ethnic composition within party membership and voter bases, and the persistence of an antisemitic streak which rose to the surface when Jews were singled out as middlemen or, in certain periods, because of their supposed communist ties. This antisemitism reflected the general attitudes of the population and the cooperative movement in many countries, and its manifestations were less virulent than in most other parties, but it was cause for concern regardless, and even when it found no expression in the upper echelons of a party, it could still be detected

at a grassroots level and among local party committees.<sup>38</sup> The Austrian *Landbund* was probably the agrarian party in which antisemitism was more acute, within the context of a programme based on enmity against Vienna, hostility against the Socialdemocrats with a strong antisemitic tint and unification with Germany.<sup>39</sup> However, even the *Landbund* was first and above anything else a party focused on the representation of agrarian producers and national issues, and the former was the priority for example when establishing alliances with other parties and determining its attitude towards governments. Its appeal was however limited by the fact that the Christian Social Party of Engelbert Dollfuss (who himself had a background as agrarian activist) managed to establish a solid link with agrarian associations.

All things considered, in a historical context in which the worst excesses of nationalism led to widespread intolerance and violence, the nationalist strain that ran through agrarian parties was far from being the most toxic. It therefore appears that Tom Nairn's equating of ethnic nationalism with peasant values and violent conflicts cannot be sustained.<sup>40</sup> There may be more truth to the Slovak agrarian politician Milan Hodža's words when he said that if agrarians were nationalists, by all accounts theirs would be a 'quiet nationalism', although further research and a more systematic comparison of case-studies is required.<sup>41</sup> 'Quiet nationalism' seems promising as a concept and it could be applied to most of the agrarian parties but not necessarily all the time. In order to be useful as an analytical tool, it should be refined in academic terms. To sum it up, it would imply tolerance towards ethnic minorities, a pacifist approach to redefining borders and foreign policy and a combination of civic and ethnic elements when defining national identities. A sample of parties under different circumstances (in power or in opposition, governing alone or in coalition with other forces, representing minorities or ethnic majority groups and so on) would allow to test the suitability of the hypotheses proposed in this article.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'golden age' is taken from A. Toshkov, *Agrarianism as Modernity in 20th-Century Europe. The Golden Age of the Peasantry* (London, 2019). For recent works on this topic, R. Bideleux, 'The Peasantries and Peasant Parties of Interwar East Central Europe', in: S.P. Ramet, (ed.), *Interwar East Central Europe, 1918-1941. The Failure of Democracy-building. The Fate of Minorities* (London, 2020), 281-331 and M. Cabo, 'Agrarian parties in Europe prior to 1945 and Beyond', in: L. Van Molle, L. Brassart, C. Marache & J. Pan-Montojo (eds.), *Making Politics in the European Countryside, from the 1780s to the 1930s* (Turnhout, 2021). The classic study is that of H. Gollwitzer, (ed.), *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20.Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> R. Daskalov & D. Mishkova, *Entangled Histories of the Balkans. Volume Two: Transfers of Political Ideologies and Institutions* (Leiden, 2014), 350-352.

<sup>4</sup> The main absences were the Hungarian and Nordic parties (apart from the Finnish one). Initially, the project had a clear pan-Slavic component which was to be diluted as time went on. For works on the Green International, H. Haushofer, 'Die internationale Organisation der Bauernparteien', in: H. Gollwitzer (ed.), *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20.Jahrhundert*, (Stuttgart, 1977), 668-690; E. Kubů & J. Šouša, 'Sen o slovanské agrární spolupráci. (Antonín Švehla - ideový a organizační tvůrce Mezinárodního agrárního bureau)', in: *Agrární strany ve vládních a samosprávných strukturách mezi světovými válkami* (Uherské Hradiště, 2008), 35-41.

<sup>5</sup> G.M. Dimitrov, 'Agrarianism', in: F. Gross (ed.), *European Ideologies, a Survey of 20th Century Political Ideas* (New York, 1948), 396.

<sup>6</sup> D. Mitrany, *Marx against the Peasant: A Study in Social Dogmatism* (Chapel Hill, 1951).

<sup>7</sup> S.M. Lipset & S. Rokkan (eds.), *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-national Perspectives* (New York, 1967). Another issue is that in some countries

the opposition between centre and periphery, Church and State or capital and labour might overlap, but the major cleavage was between city and country.

<sup>8</sup> L. Fernández Prieto & M. Cabo, 'Agrarian movements, the National Question, and Democracy in Europe, 1880-1945', in: X.M. Núñez Seixas (ed.), *The First World War and the Nationality Question in Europe* (Leiden, 2020), 226-290.

<sup>9</sup> 'Idée de l'agrarisme universel', in: *Bulletin du Bureau International Agricole* 1 (1923), 3-7. The same concept in Švehl, who thought Poles resisting the assimilation policies of Prussian governments a telling example, in Eduard Kubu & Jiri Sousa (eds.) *Rozmluvy s Antonínem Svehlou a o Svehlovi. Vzpomínky agrárního diplomata Karla Mecíre*, (Prague, 2018), 83-85.

<sup>10</sup> J. Rutaj, *Peasant International in Action* (London, 1948), 7.

<sup>11</sup> T. Varley, 'On the Road to Extinction: Agrarian Parties in Twentieth-Century Ireland', in: *Irish Political Studies* 25/4 (2010), 581-601.

<sup>12</sup> K. Lorenz (ed.), *Cooperatives in Ethnic Conflicts: Eastern Europe in the 19th and early 20th Century* (Berlin, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> 'Ante Radić Le Père du Mouvement Paysan Croate', in: *Bulletin Union Internationale Paysanne* 1 (1950), 7-8.

<sup>14</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> J. Augusteijn & E. Storm (eds.), *Region and State in Nineteenth-Century Europe. Nation-Building, Regional Identities and Separation* (London, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> E. Lynch, 'Le parti agraire et paysan français, entre politique et manifestation', in: *Histoire et Sociétés Rurales*, 13 (2005), 54-65.

<sup>17</sup> On Dorgères, R.O. Paxton, *Le temps des chemises vertes. Révoltes paysannes et fascisme rural, 1923-1939* (Paris, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> *Bulletin du Bureau International Agraire* 1928-4, 262.

<sup>19</sup> The peasant-soldier myth was commonplace among other parties; E. Lynch, 'Les usages politiques du soldat laboureur: paysannerie et nation dans la France et l'Europe agrariennes 1880-1945', in: J.L. Mayaud & L. Raphael (eds.), *Histoire de l'Europe rurale contemporaine. Du village à l'État* (Paris, 2005), 332-349.

<sup>20</sup> U. Østergård, 'Denmark: A Big Small State – The Peasant Roots of Danish Modernity', in: J.L. Campbell, J.A. Hall & O.K. Pedersen, *National Identity and the Varieties of Capitalism: The Danish Experience* (Ithaca, 2006), 53-98.

<sup>21</sup> G.A. Andersen & J.B. Jensen, 'The Danish Venstre: Liberal, Agrarian or Centrist?', in: D. Arter (ed.), *From Farmyard to City Square?: the Electoral Adaptation of the Nordic Agrarian Parties* (Ann Arbor, 2001), 96-131.

<sup>22</sup> J.D. Bell, *Peasants in Power: Alexander Stamboliski and the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union, 1899-1923* (Princeton, 1977). Toshkov, *Agrarianism*, 65.

<sup>23</sup> A. Stamboliski, *Œuvres choisies* (Sofia, 1981), 48-50.

<sup>24</sup> M. Biondich, *Stjepan Radic, the Croat Peasant Party, and the Politics of Mass Mobilization, 1904-1928* (Toronto, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> S. Sobieraj, *Die nationale Politik des Bundes der Landwirte in der Ersten Tschechoslowakischen Republik: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Verständigung zwischen Tschechen und Deutschen (1918-1929)* (Frankfurt am Main, 2002). It is significant that the Green International congress of 1929 entrusted the *Bund der Landwirte* with the presentation of a report on the national question, which concluded that pacts with agrarian parties at home and abroad were the first step towards its solution; *Neuer Morgen* 27/5/1929.

<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, it did not have the opportunity to defend this position because it was immediately illegalised under an agreement between president Edvard Beneš and the communists. See for example the following editorial from the party's newspaper in exile, in which it is maintained that tolerance had been increasing during the First Republic thanks to the bridges laid by agrarian parties, 'Poměr Republikánské strany na národním menšinám', in: *Agrární politika. List Čs. Republikánské Strany v Zahraničí*, 1/1/1954.

<sup>27</sup> I. Avakumovic, 'The Serb Peasant Party, 1919-1945', in: I. Volgyes (ed.), *The Peasantry of Eastern Europe* (N. York, 1979), 57-78.

<sup>28</sup> M. Hodža, *Články, reči, štúdie. IV Cesty Stredo-Evropskej agrárnej demokracie 1921-1931* (Prague, 1931), 276.

<sup>29</sup> *Venkov* (25-12-1937).

<sup>30</sup> A-M. Koll, 'Agrarianism and Ethnicity', in: H. Schultz & E. Kubů (eds.), *History and Culture of Economic Nationalism in East Central Europe* (Berlin, 2006), 141-160; J. Eellend, 'Agrarianism and Modernization in Inter-War Eastern Europe',

in: P. Wawrzeniuk (ed.), *Societal Change and Ideological Formation among the Rural Population of the Baltic Area 1880-1939* (Huddinge, 2008), 35-56.

<sup>31</sup> Toshkov, *Agrarianism*, 61.

<sup>32</sup> A valuable and recent contribution on this point is D. Müller, *Bodeneigentum und Nation. Rumänien, Jugolawien und Polen im europäischen Vergleich 1918-1948*, (Göttingen, 2020).

<sup>33</sup> On the uses and setbacks of said dichotomy, see among others U. Özkirimli, *Contemporary Debates on Nationalism. A Critical Engagement* (Basingstoke, 2005), 15-28, or X.M. Núñez Seixas, 'Nations and Territorial Identities in Europe: Transnational Reflections', in: *European History Quarterly*, 40/4 (2010), 669-684.

<sup>34</sup> M. Van Ginderachter & J. Fox (eds.), *National Indifference and the History of Nationalism in Modern Europe* (New York, 2019).

<sup>35</sup> N. Swain, 'The Fate of Peasant Parties during Socialist Transformation', in: H. Schultz, A. Harre, W. Benecke, C. Boyer, U. Muller, A. Nutzenadel, & P. Ther (eds.), *Bauerngesellschaften auf dem Weg in die Moderne* (Wiesbaden, 2010), 163-176.

<sup>36</sup> The most complete expression of this is M. Hodža, *Federation in Central Europe. Reflections and Reminiscences* (London, 1942).

<sup>37</sup> B.Trencsényi, M. Janowski, M. Baár, M. Falina & M. Kopeč, *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe* (Oxford, 2018), 484; P. Swacha, 'European Integration in the International Peasant Union Concepts', in: J.Rychlík, L. Holec & M. Pehr (eds.), *Agrarismus ve střední východní Evrope 19. A 20. Století* (Prague, 2015), 281-294; S. Leček, 'Dream of World Peace: Croatian Peasant Party and Two Concepts of the Community of Nations', in: J. Gmitruk & A. Indraszczyk (eds.), *Historia i tradycje ruchu ludowego, Tom 1: Ideologia, polityka i jej kreatorzy* (Warsaw, 2016), 247-263

<sup>38</sup> K. Struve, 'Die Juden in der Sicht der polnischen Bauernparteien vom Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts bis 1939', in: *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropaforschung* 48 (1999), 184-225; M. Fleming, *Communism, Nationalism and Ethnicity in Poland, 1944-1950* (London, 2010), 62.

<sup>39</sup> A. Haas, *Die vergessene Bauernpartei. Der Steirische Landbund und sein Einfluß auf die österreichische Politik 1918-1934* (Graz 2000).

<sup>40</sup> T. Nairn, *Faces of Nationalism. Janus Revisited* (London, 1997), 90-110.

<sup>41</sup> M. Hodža, *Články, reči, štúdie. IV Cesty Stredo-Evropskej agrárnej demokracie 1921-1931* (Prague, 1931), 277.