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THE APPLICATION OF THE LAND REFORM OF 1864 IN VÂLCEA COUNTY

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Abstract: The application of the land reform of 1864, which brought about the apportionment of 42,218 hectares to 14,594 inhabitants, reduced the ownership of the landed gentry who still possessed between 50 and 5,000 ha, without resolving the lack of land and tools with most of the inhabitants of the Romanian villages. As a result of the faulty application of this reform, the world of Romanian village experienced new uprisings which culminated in the Revolt of 1907.

Keywords: reform, bondsmen, apportionment commission, leaseholders, Vâlcea county.

The reforms rapidly carried out in Al.I. Cuza's rule of seven years laid the organisational foundations of the modern state. Profound economic, social, political and cultural changes occurred during the period. From among the implemented reforms, the agrarian one stood out in relief owing to its profound implications for the whole Romanian society. During Cuza's reign there were no domains which did not witness conspicuous and remarkable progress. Romania emerged on the scene of European states not only as a national state, but also as a modern state.

Numerous documents of the time attest to the way of carrying out the land reform in Vâlcea county, as well as in all the other counties, as a matter of fact. The situation of the peasants in Vâlcea county was similar to that of the peasants all over the country.

The land reform of 1864 allocated a lot of land areas to be used by peasantry and abolished the feudal servitude. But the land issue in Vâlcea county as well as in the entire Romania, was not resolved, though the landed gentry's ownership became considerably diminished. In spite of its limitations the rural law created conditions and accelerated the emergence of capitalist relations in agriculture.

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Now numerous owners and leaseholders will have at their disposal important amounts of money from the compensation received from those who had been given land, thus having the opportunity given by the farms renewal to rapidly reinforce their economic position and to organise production following the rules of the capitalist type of farms. The former bondsmen who had been cultivating some plots on estates in accordance with the law of 1851, now by virtue of the rural law were put in possession of agricultural lands, their size depending on the number of draught cattle. From the very beginning this fact favoured the peasantry stratification, eliminating almost completely any possible progress of the small farm, especially, towards higher levels. Most peasantry were allotted little land, while a part of them were altogether excluded from the assignment of land because of the way of application of the land reform¹.

Referring to peasant's fate, Ion Ionescu de la Brad emphasized in 1876 that "it is worse than in 1848", because the peasant has a lot of taxes, and the landowner "leaves him to starve, with land run wild and mercilessly profits from his toil and exploits him by agricultural agreements under the cover of law"². During the application of the land reform, as well as in the following years, the owners and leaseholders committed numerous transgressions which contributed to the worsening of the economic situation of a great part of the peasantry. From among the known transgressions during the land reform there are those concerning bondsmen's classification into inferior categories, the diminishing of land areas during measuring, the allotting of barren lands, the unfair apportionment of plots, delaying the works of land assignment, excluding some people from the right of being given land etc.³. There was an obvious trend towards restricting certain law provisions, a fact which damaged peasants' interests. Faced with these injustices, peasants did not remain impassive. It is certain that in order to thoroughly know the causes which had hastened and increased peasants' unrest in Vâlcea county – during the period we are studying – we are supposed to start with a serious analysis of the consequences of the land reform of 1864 and especially after the apportionment of land.

Examining the ownership in Vâlcea county, a hilly, subcarpathian territory situated in the north of Oltenia, one notices most properties were freehold. Back to 1722, the Italian Virmonite's administrative documents ascertained that the landowners represented at that time 55.5% of the number of proprietors⁴. The changes that occurred during almost two centuries, unfavourable to the freeholders' collective ownership, but also to the small ownership, led to the diminishing of this

¹ G. Cerbu, A. Deac, *Mișcări și frământări țărănești în România la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea (1889–1900)*, Bucharest, Științific Publishing, 1965, p. 10.

² "Telegraful" from 11 February, apud *Enciclopedia Județului Vâlcea*, vol. I, Râmnicu-Vâlcea, Fortuna Publishing, 2010, p. 330.

³ N. Adăniloae, D. Berindei, *Reforma agrară din 1864*, Bucharest, Academy Publishing, 1967, p. 245.

⁴ Henri H. Sthal, *Contribuții la studiul satelor devălmașe românești*, vol. I, Bucharest, Academy Publishing, 1958, p. 34.

percentage, the statistics recording in 1912 that 46.9% of the owners in Vâlcea county were freeholders⁵.

The second category of land owning peasantry, which was in the attention of the authorities of the time, was that of the bondsmen. A lot of these were not put in possession of land, being omitted in 1864. G.D. Creangă shows us that through the land reform during Cuza's reign, a number of 14,594 Vâlcea bondsmen were given 42,218.6036 ha of land⁶. But the archive documents to be found in Vâlcea county prefecture record that only 10,935 bondsmen were put in possession of 75,975 acres of land which had formerly belonged to 551 private or public property⁷. Another source indicates 11,028 persons who were put in possession of land in Vâlcea county⁸. The differences between the above mentioned numbers come from the inexact data reported by subprefectures and by Vâlcea Prefecture. In 1889 other 1,400 villagers in Vâlcea came into possession of 6,671.0025 ha⁹.

All the changes that occurred in Vâlcea village structure, especially towards the end of the 19th century can be synthesized in the following way¹⁰:

	<i>Small-sized property</i>		<i>Middle-sized property</i>		<i>Large property</i>	
	$\frac{1}{2}$ - 10 ha		10-100 ha		over 100 ha	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<i>Number of owners</i>	40,761	95.06	2,075	4.83	49	0.11
<i>Area</i>	134,027	73.40	37,161	20.35	11,425	6.25

Therefore, the small sized property, that is 95.06 percentage of the owners represented 73.40 percentage of the cultivated land of the county, while the large property with elements of leasing and additional exploitation of peasants represented 0.11% of the owners and 6.25% of the land.

The same documents attests there were 2,197 fathers of families, landless peasants. The preponderance of small property, continuously subjected to the pressure of the exchequer, the big owners and the neighbouring leaseholders, preserved in Vâlcea county, though the number of the landless people there was small, a state of permanent unrest of the villages. Even though that did not lead to bloody rebellions, the last decades of the 19th century witnessed Vâlcea peasants

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ G.D. Creangă, *Proprietatea rurală în România*, Bucharest, 1907, p. 131.

⁷ Serviciul Județean Vâlcea al Arhivelor Naționale (Vâlcea County Department of National Archives; further quoted as SJAN Vâlcea), fund Prefectura județului Vâlcea, file 31/1866, ff. 121–122, 209–214, 264–267; file 32/1866, ff. 76–79, 158–160, 342–352, 425–429.

⁸ N. Adăniloiaie, D. Berindei, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

⁹ G.D. Creangă, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

¹⁰ *1907 în județul Vâlcea*, Bălcești pe Topolog, 1974, p. XV.

actions, aimed at maintaining and preserving the small landed properties which provided the bare necessities of daily living.

The sources of the time reveal that the peasants in Vâlcea welcomed the appearance of the rural law, but vehemently protested whenever this was not correctly applied. Transgressions were recorded both during the first years of the land reform application and after 1878, and especially after the transfer of the land allotted through land reform became legal. The protests of Vâlcea peasantry were directed against the big landowners and leaseholders during the preparation of the reform works but in equal measure against the administration of county, of smaller rural district and commune, which condoned this kind of abuses. For example, the peasants' complaints in Pârâieni village, Livezi commune, clearly demonstrate that peasants had been put in possession of "utterly barren, caved and pastureless places"¹¹, while the people in Zăvideni and Risipiți were dispossessed of the initially received plots, by the landowners and leaseholders who had ordered new arbitrary measurement¹².

It must be mentioned that, though having the right to be put in possession of land according to the law, because of delay certain peasants did not come into possession of rightful plots even after twenty years, nevertheless they were obliged to pay the land tax for this plot. That is what happened to the inhabitants of Temșani commune: "the estate which was supposed to become their property in 1864 was not divided among them even in 1884, though all of them had paid the compensation owed for the compulsory service"¹³. A similar situation appears from the report of the sub-prefect of Ocolul to Vâlcea county prefecture, concerning the petition signed by seven Genuneni commune inhabitants who did not get all the acres that were their due in conformity with the delimiting plan and "though the mayor got orders to reinstate the petitioners". In spite of the orders, without any scruples, the owner of the commune reaped the benefit of the land legally allotted to those who were put in possession of it¹⁴.

In 1884, the inhabitants of Văideeni were submitting a complaint, with 123 signatures which announced that the delays in drawing up the final documents for land assignment were the fault of the surveyors who, though having been remunerated, were on the side of those interested in not putting the rural law into operation¹⁵.

The way of carrying out the land reform of 1864 has also other aspects that exist even after Romania gained her State Independence. Under the law provisions the lands allotted to the peasants were not to be transferred for 30 years. In spite of this, during the whole period of 1864-1900 numerous villagers found themselves in the situation of not long benefiting from the lands allotted to them or of losing

¹¹ N. Adăniloaie, D. Berindei, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 300.

¹³ SJAN Vâlcea, fund Prefectura județului Vâlcea, file 7/1884, nonpaged.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, file 53/1878, ff. 84-85.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, file 7/1884, nonpaged.

them for ever. This situation was due to the lack of capital which made almost impossible to compensate for the lands allotted or organised to an extended property, a fact which led to the mortgaging of many plots assigned through the rural law. Moreover, the large number of children in the peasant family determined the plot decreasing through the apportionment to the heirs. All these brought about the development of money-lenders section in the village, whose greed for land gradually turned it into a well-off peasant category. This phenomenon had become so frequent that the government decided to form commissions in counties and in smaller rural districts, which should draw up tables of land transfers to be submitted to the courts in order to check the transfer legality. In this sense the examination of a situation in Oltu district shows the following¹⁶:

<i>Commune</i>	<i>No. of inhabitants who gave up their ownership of the land</i>	<i>The transferred area</i>
<i>Fumureni</i>	14	68 ½ acres
<i>Voicești</i>	9	42 acres and 61 of perchs
<i>Zlătărei</i>	17	93 ¼ acres
<i>Călina</i>	18	27 acres and 9 litre
<i>Aurești</i>	12	12 ¼ acres
<i>Prundeni</i>	8	7 ¼ acres
<i>Rîmești</i>	2	8 acres and 44 of perchs
Total	80	

So, only in Oltu district, on 11 December 1878, 80 inhabitants transferred important land areas, while in the following period the process continued on a larger scale. In 1879, according to a central statistic, Vâlcea county was ranked among the first three in the country, with 1,827 inhabitants who had transferred their lands¹⁷.

Being aware of this general situation, the prefect of Vâlcea county was sending to the Ministry of Internal Affairs alarming reports regarding the large number of land transfers and the devices used by the grabbers. Very convincing in this sense was I.C. Brătianu's statement during the Senate meeting of December 1878, according to whom "the priest, the mayor, the notary and the tax collector bought land in 1864 from the peasants"¹⁸.

Due to the worsening of the social relations in the villages, on the eve of Independence War, the liberal government promised to give land to certain categories of villagers. Delayed year after year, the issue of land assignment to newly-married couples and to the other categories of peasants who, though corresponding to articles 5 and 6 of the law introduced in August 1864 had not received land yet, was more

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, file 54/1878, ff. 122–123.

¹⁷ N. Adăniloie, D. Berindei, *op. cit.*, p. 341.

¹⁸ C. Corbu, *Țărănimea din România între 1864 și 1888*, Bucharest, Stiințific Publishing, 1970, p. 30.

powerfully raised after gaining the national independence. What the liberal government had promised to the soldiers, through the circular of 27 October 1876 and also on the battlefield, had to become reality. The villagers had gained the victory and, as Radu Rosseti says, they would have gained it “even if nothing had been promised to them, because they would have fought equally bravely”¹⁹.

The government started to take action, but not to the extent of his demagogic commitments, made when required. The allotment of land to the newly-married couples in Vâlcea county was carried out with many delays, like in other counties, producing new and big discontent among peasants. On 10 November 1878, Vâlcea Prefecture submits to the Estates Administration the 21 reports “on the findings on the public property concerning the land assignment to the newly-married couples”, asking for an engineer to start allotting the lands. In the country there were 18 public estates, namely: Drăgășani, Călina, Prundeni, Aurești, Gușoieni, Străchineasca, Șerbănești, Mitrofani, Zlătărei, Stănești, Mamu (din Mamu), Mamu (din Fumureni), Râmești, Sușani, Brăiasca, Budoiu, Cățelu and Drăganu on the territory of which the assignment of land was possible, according to the law²⁰. Until 16 October the following actions of land allotment had been carried out for newly-married couples²¹:

Estate	Inhabitants who were put in possession of land	The area for inhabitants	The area for schools
Șușanii de Sus	8	40 acres	18 acres
Râmești	17	119 acres	17 acres
Dozești	5	35 acres	17 acres
Slăvitești	20	140 acres	17 acres
Rusănești	1	6 acres	17 acres
Zlătărei	6	39 acres	18 acres
Gușoieni	2	14 acres	17 acres
Drăganu	1	7 acres	17 acres
Foleștii de Sus	5	15 acres	17 acres
Romani	51	332 acres	18 acres
Călina	2	12 acres	17 acres
Străchineasa	39	243 acres	17 acres
Muiereasca de Sus	18	132 acres	17 acres
Muiereasca de Jos	8	132 acres	17 acres
Costești	44	336 acres	17 acres
Total	239	1.800 acres	207 acres

¹⁹ Radu Rosseti, *Pentru ce s-au răsculat țărani*, Bucharest, 1907, p. 571.

²⁰ SJAN Vâlcea, fund Prefectura județului Vâlcea, file 54/1878, ff. 75–76.

²¹ *Ibidem*, file 7/1880, nonpaged.

According to the statistics of 1894, 281 villagers were put in possession of 1978 acres on the public estates²².

The leaseholders on the public estates “driven only by the interest in profiting at any price and by all means” tried to hinder the assignment of land to the newly-married couples. They wanted to illegally impose to the villagers labour contracts which would have ensured receiving onerous obligations even after the land allotment, arguing that the application of these laws is entirely subordinated to them. Being informed by the Estate Administration about these malevolent intentions of the leaseholders, the Ministry of Internal Affairs sends a circular to all the county prefectures asking them “to notify to all the communes and villages through posters attached on townhall door, through announcements made on Sundays and holidays and through any other far reaching means, the fact that the assignment of land on the public estates to those categories of villagers mentioned by the articles no. 4 and 6 of the rural law is for them a gained right, and for the government a duty to fulfil”²³.

But in spite of these categorical orders, many of the newly-married couples were later excluded from the land assignment, while others refused the allotted lands for various reasons. For instance, those people in Muierasca de Sus entitled to come into possession of land did not receive their plots even until 4 March 1880, though they had for several times submitted complaints to the county authorities mentioning that in vain “it is high time they started to work while in fact they remain hopeless, the leaseholder laughing and driving them away from the places that had formerly been their source of food”²⁴.

Four years later, the newly-married couples on Drăgășani estate were faced with a real predicament, most of them being unjustly omitted from the lists. They showed that they were “in want”, having no place to do the ploughing necessary for the family, the leaseholders demanding 30 francs per acre, while some of them have not even places to live in, being driven away “as if they were animals”²⁵.

The lagging behind of the works for completing the allotment of land to the newly-married couples was also due to the engineer Ioan Claus, who until 1885 had not finished the delimitation plans²⁶.

The lack of land and working tools, the droughts of the years 1865-1867 and 1873-1874, the taxes and obligations towards landowners and leaseholders made up a social picture which engendered the uprisings of the last decade of the 19th century.

The numerous documents of the time prove that in all the communes and small rural districts of the county, conflicts broke out, generated by the delay in

²² *Ibidem*, file 45/1894, f. 65.

²³ *Ibidem*, file 54/1878, ff. 62-63.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, file 7/1880, nonpaged.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, file 7/1884, nonpaged.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, file 1/1885, f. 121.

applying the rural law, by excluding a large number of bondsmen from the tables of land allotment through fraudulent means, as well as by passing from a superior to an inferior category, at the same time with allotting smaller plots than those people were entitled to receive. On many estates, the landowners brought private engineers, they measured and gave the villagers infertile and scattered plots²⁷. The petition of the peasants in Laloșu attests the fact that those who were put in possession of land were given “poor land and far from their home”²⁸. They were blaming the owner Ion Pârâianu who had disregarded their right and work, allotting them “plots unsuitable for cultivation”²⁹. The villagers of the communes Benești, Lungești, Gușoieni and Lăpușata express the same dissatisfaction in a series of petitions to the county’s authorities. The owner Alecu Bujoreanul, from Bujoreni commune, not taking into account “the rightful complaints” of the villagers, allotted them plots “on hills and escarpment”, just like the owner Costea Otetelișanu, who burdened the peasants in Surpatelor hamlet, Pietroasa commune, with lands far from their homes, at the end of the village³⁰.

Marking the limits of the plots represented another grievance of those put in possession of land. So, after several complaints unsolved by the mayor, the people in Mihaiești were bound to address the prefect to do away with the transgressions committed by the county authorities. In Oltețul de Sus district, at Părăușani, the peasants took up a position against the local committee decision, because they had been “completely excluded from the right of becoming owners” on Pleșoianu’s estate³¹. Equally indignant were the bondsmen from Cârstănești, because the property allotted to them “was reduced” and they were displaced to “valleys and slopes”³². Protests also took place in the villages Pojogii and Bogdănești³³.

Numerous appeals were also lodged by priests and school teachers. In October 1864, several psalm readers from churches belonging to Bistrița Monastery addressed a petition to Vâlcea Prefecture against the apportionment commission who did not want to put them in possession of the land they “were working”³⁴. In similar positions were some teachers in Vâlcea school, such as G. Alexandrescu, teacher at Costești School, who had got his own “lawfully given” acres, which he had worked, for his benefit, until the rural law promulgation. He saw himself excluded “from the boons of this law” on the grounds that it did not stipulate anything for the commune primary school teachers. Alexandrescu was explaining to the prefect that before being a primary school teacher he was a Romanian and a farmer. He went on to demand “to be

²⁷ Apud *Enciclopedia Județului Vâlcea*, vol. I, Râmnicu-Vâlcea, Editura Fortuna, 2010, p. 330.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ SJAN Vâlcea, fund Prefectura județului Vâlcea, file 8/1865, f. 112.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, file 5/1865, f. 149.

³¹ *Ibidem*, file 6/1865, f. 315.

³² *Ibidem*, f. 74.

³³ *Ibidem*, file 5/1865, f. 395.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, file 7/1865, f. 30.

at least classified as a bondsman” and “to be left with the acres I had worked and possessed until now”. He was hoping that “the mission of primary school teacher he had so eagerly taken up will not be an obstacle to his coming into possession of land and will not place him with the feeble”, because then “I would come to regret I hadn’t remained a mere bondsman”³⁵.

The scarcity of engineers and other specialists in topography led to the delay of the survey requested by the communities. On 2 June 1865 a report of the prefect to the central authorities revealed the lack of engineers necessary for the progress of the operations³⁶. Another report of the Vâlcea prefect to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, on 3 November 1874, pointed to the faulty way of applying the rural law, “the interference of some influential persons”, which resulted in “villagers being put in possession of lands without being entitled to it”, namely valuable lands³⁷.

The arrangements made by certain representatives of the local authorities and by the landowners led not only to spontaneous revolts, but also to uprisings, such as those in Benești, Zătreni, Otetelișu. The documents also mention actions of “rebellion” in Mădulari, Dăești, Brezoi and Câineni³⁸.

The ever marked penetration of the capitalist economy into the Romanian village, the inclusion of the agricultural production in exchange economy made the owners and leaseholders ensure their stable work force in order to obtain maximum profit, under the conditions of parallel existence of peasant small property and landowner’s large property. Because of the growing pecuniary character of the economy, the vast majority of landlords gave up the direct exploitation of their lands and resorted to the services of leaseholders. These people tried to obtain a maximum of profit, by worsening the exploitation of the work of peasants who, because the rural law had allotted to them small plots, were forced to work the acres of neighbouring estates as sharecroppers.

From a statistic of the time – referring to the year 1902 – one can notice that this phenomenon was present in Vâlcea county too³⁹:

Land owned (area in hectares)	Number of owners	Area in ha.	Under state supervision	Exploited estates – ha.			Total
				Leaseholding		Other uses	
				No. of the leased	Area for cultivation		
50–100	38	3.785	2.729	6	455	601	1.056
100–500	44	18.116	14.683	7	1.970	1.462	3.433
500–1.000	5	4.122	1.206	3	1.997	919	2.916
Total	87	26.023	18.618	16	4.422	3.083	7.405

³⁵ *Ibidem*, f. 92.

³⁶ *Enciclopedia Județului Vâlcea*, vol. I, Râmnicu-Vâlcea, Fortuna Publishing, 2010, p. 331.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 332.

³⁹ 1907 în județul Vâlcea, *op. cit.*, tabel no. 4

Being interested in the development of agricultural production, especially on the large estates, Romania's governments supported the landowners' and leaseholders' wish to have laws concerning the agricultural agreements, which were nothing else but contracts between the owners and the producers of goods. It is true that, milke industry, these contracts excluded payment for work in cash only, stipulating also payment in kind, but it imposed the obligation that the contract clauses should be obeyed, otherwise the public force was to be used. Passed in 1866 by the country's Parliament, the law of agricultural agreements was to be modified in 1872 by introducing the items about the use of foot soldiers in the enforcement of the peasants.

The owners and especially the leaseholders proved to be fairly inventive in subjugating the work of the oppressed. A case in point is that of Grigore Pleoianu, the leaseholder of Pârâienii de Jos estate, who demanded in the contract of agricultural agreement that "38 miserable wretches should permanently work all the days of all the weeks without being left at last half a week for thier own work"⁴⁰. The conditions imposed to Frâncești commune inhabitants by the leaseholder Sterie Dumitrescu and presented in their complaint submitted to Vâlcea Prefecture are even harsher, the contract concluded through constraining the villagers both by the leaseholders and commune authorities "that each inhabitant should plough six acres and sow maize; should till without payment there acres for each plough, with only five francs payment per acre; they should work four days for each of the big cattle and two days for each of the small cattle, but if the work arrangement is not respected, the peasants are to pay two lei for each work day, while if they work additional days the leaseholder is to pay only fifty bani and they bring their own food; they are supposed to give the leaseholder pork steak on Christmas, twenty eggs at Easter and two chickens in summer; the villagers were also bound to provide transport by cart pulled by oxen from the estate to Râmnicu Vâlcea and if the obligation was not fulfilled, the leaseholder was to receive ten new lei for each transport; the leaseholder's cattle were free to graze anywhere, he also had the right to allow other cattle to graze on the communal pasture, given to the inhabitants"⁴¹.

The high degree of exploitation of Vâlcea peasantry remained also in the first decade of the 20th century, which caused the great uprising of 1907. The rural law of 1864 generated new inequalities which were not resolved even by the vast reform of 1921.

⁴⁰ SJAN Vâlcea, fund Prefectura județului Vâlcea, file 94/1879, f. 111.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, file 75/1880, ff. 7–8.