

The Land Reform of 1919: What Were the Available Options?

Debates in the Constituent Assembly

Eli Pilve

Types of manors

There were about 1,120 manors throughout Estonian territory in the mid-19th century:

- Private manors or manors belonging to nobles
- Manors belonging to knighthoods
- Manors belonging to towns
- Rectories or pastorates
- Crown manors
- *Landstelle's* or country residences

Holdings

- By the time the Republic of Estonia was established:
 - 1,149 manors (2,428,087 ha or 58% of all Estonian territory)
 - 51,640 smallholdings (1,761,015 ha or 42% of the land)
 - Rental lands belonging to manors = 55.3% at the disposal of smallholdings and 44.7% in large estates

Start of expropriation

- 27 November 1918 – Provincial Assembly ordinances for taking control of manor lands.
- 17 December 1918 – Provincial Assembly ordinances for implementing taking control of manor lands.
- 28 December 1918 – Suure-Sausti Manor was the first to be taken over.

Land reform plans of Estonian political parties ahead of Constituent Assembly elections

Estonian Labour Party

- Nationalisation of all manor lands, including the core manor buildings, if more than 50 ha of land belonged to one owner
- Farms – land exceeding the norm that was not under cultivation
- Compensation – in the interests of the state, the larger the landholding and the longer it had been used, the lower the compensation
- Manors belonging to knighthoods, rectories and majorat manors – without compensation
- 15–20 ha per family of farmers who wanted land, on the basis of perpetual rent

Land reform plans of Estonian political parties ahead of Constituent Assembly elections

Estonian Social Democratic Workers' Party

- Expropriation of all land without compensation
- Small landholdings
- Perpetual rent
- Farms purchased outright were exempted

Land reform plans of Estonian political parties ahead of Constituent Assembly elections

Estonian Socialist-Revolutionary Party

- Distribution of manor lands for collective cultivation to manor labourers, landless peasants and peasants with little land
- Hereditary perpetual rent

Land reform plans of Estonian political parties ahead of Constituent Assembly elections

Estonian League of Rural People

- 40,000 new farms
- Lands belonging to knighthoods and crown lands for permanent rent or outright purchase
- Expropriation of manors as needed in return for just compensation
- Start with neglected manors
- Calculations over a time frame of decades

Land reform plans of Estonian political parties ahead of Constituent Assembly elections

Estonian People's Party

- Termination of manorial estate holdings
- Land for all who want it
- 300 dessiatines
- Land from large farms to cottagers

Land reform plans of Estonian political parties ahead of Constituent Assembly elections

German-Baltic Party in Estonia

- Land transfer associations → 1/3 of the land → farmsteads district commission
- Appropriate compensation
- 15–20 ha per farmstead

Land Act debates in the Constituent Assembly

- Leftism vs rightism:
 - ✓ Estonian League of Rural People and **Estonian People's Party**,
 - ✓ (Christian People's Party),
 - ✓ German-Baltic Party,
 - ✓ **Estonian Social Democratic Workers' Party and Estonian Labour Party**,
 - ✓ (Estonian Socialist-Revolutionary Party),
 - ✓ (Assembly of Russian Citizens).

Land Act debates in the Constituent Assembly

- Changes compared to pre-election promises:
 - ✓ the social democrats drew nearer to the labourites,
 - ✓ People's Party in favour of large holdings (300 dessiatines) and gradual expropriation,
 - ✓ League of Rural People, with the Christians following behind.

Jaan Tõnisson

And now I ask, with what right do you want to rape the people's will in advance? What gives the current generation the right to say: we're going to determine the future for you in advance?!

Using Bolshevism as a warning

- Rightists:
 - Leftist draft legislation = Bolshevism
- Leftists:
 - Rightist draft legislation = Bolshevism

Konrad-Johan Pitka, Murikatsi Manor
leaseholder, 1919.

./.../ I've worked with my family for 22 years, I must say like a serf. ./.../ My property that I've earned with the greatest toil is being expropriated at wholesale and 1914 market prices and it's being given to those who haven't a clue, so to speak. Because a manly man doesn't use what belongs to another – he's ashamed of living off somebody else's property, of living from charity.

Letter from the front, 1919

./.../ as we know, you there are currently debating the Land Act and steering in the direction that soldiers, who have redeemed this land with their blood and have somehow managed to stay alive, will have to redeem this land again with money when they come home ./.../ By way of introduction, we say to you only that one day when the war dies down and we get the chance to come home, then you'll have to have the kind of Land Act ready that corresponds completely to our services. If not, we'll sweep you off life's stage like down feathers and make our own Land Act ourselves that will satisfy the lower strata.

The People's Party protest in the voting

- They left the assembly hall during the second reading of the Land Act draft bill
- They voted against §1 at the third reading of the draft bill
- The League of Rural People participated in the voting

Results of the Land Act

- 10 October 1919
- The following were expropriated:
 - ✓ almost all manor land, Russian-era crown land, some land belonging to the church = 2.3 million ha of land = over half of the existing agricultural land,
 - ✓ manor buildings, agricultural equipment, livestock, various kinds of industrial enterprises,
 - ✓ payment for land to be decided by separate laws, immediate payment for other property (symbolic)
 - ✓ average size of farmsteads established on manor lands = 16.4 ha
 - ✓ soldiers, disabled soldiers, families of soldiers killed in the war were given priority,
 - ✓ 1925 = 70% of the land had been distributed = 41,000 new farms
 - ✓ About 54,000 farms over the course of 20 years