

Rural Revival in Marne, 1914–1930

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Abstract

In 1918 Reims stood in ruins and was surrounded by devastated countryside. The impact of destruction in Marne *département* may be classified into four zones, of which the 'red zone' was the most seriously damaged. In wartime military forces and voluntary organizations, such as the Quakers, worked to restore farmland, repair buildings, and provide temporary shelters. Their example was emulated by the state's special *Services* in the early years of peace. By 1921–22 this emergency phase was overtaken by the recovery phase in which attention was devoted to providing permanent accommodation for returnees. Cooperative reconstruction societies played an important role in this activity. Villages and farmsteads were repaired or completely rebuilt in more modern and hygienic fashion, but the opportunity for radical remodelling of the countryside was not seized. Damaged vineyards on the Montagne de Reims were restored. Rural landownership patterns were recreated in the pre-war fashion; very little plot consolidation occurred. Sections of the 'red zone' were too seriously devastated to be brought back into cultivation, despite protests from local farmers. Such areas were allocated for military training. In many respects, rural revival in Marne involved re-inventing the structures of the past rather than fashioning a new future in the countryside.

ALBERT Demangeon likened the impact of World War I on the tranquil landscapes of northern France to the passage of a cyclone which damaged properties in over 4000 *communes* and devastated 3,337,000 ha in ten *départements*.¹ Of course, the 'cyclone' struck with varying intensity so that the *Ministère des Régions Libérées* could declare that 1,719,087 ha needed only simple clearance of shells and debris, 1,501,273 ha would require sustained effort over several years, but 116,640 ha were so seriously devastated that this 'red zone' seemed beyond hope of restoration² (Fig 1). The French state had declared its commitment to compensating all who suffered loss (the *sinistrés*) very soon after the war had started (Circular of 27 October 1914), and reaffirmed this position in the great *dommages de guerre* legislation of 17 April 1919, which entered the statute book after prolonged debate in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Claims for compensation needed to be formulated in a legally acceptable way by each *sinistré*. This task could be facilitated by

lawyers, architects and accountants, and such help was duly obtained by industrialists and rich landowners. By contrast, humble family farmers, often with few or no resources at their command, were unable to operate in this way, and a new cooperative formula had to be devised to mediate between the apparently benevolent state and the distressed *sinistrés*.

Compensation and reconstruction were intensely personal matters, and the state did not commit itself to the physical task of rebuilding ruined towns, villages and farmsteads. It did, however, organize a number of short-term emergency services to clear explosives, fill trenches, remove barbed wire, restore farmland, supply seeds, equipment and livestock, and provide temporary shelters for returned *sinistrés*. Some emergency services operated while hostilities raged, others were created after the armistice was signed. They were directed from Paris and had local administrations that were distinct from the *préfectures* of the *régions dévastées*. They operated in the harshest of conditions and relied on prisoner-of-war labour and civilian workforces assembled in haste. By virtue of their dubi-

¹ A Demangeon, *Le déclin de l'Europe*, Paris, 1920, p 34.

² E Michel, *Les dommages de guerre et leur réparation*, Paris, 1932, p 90.

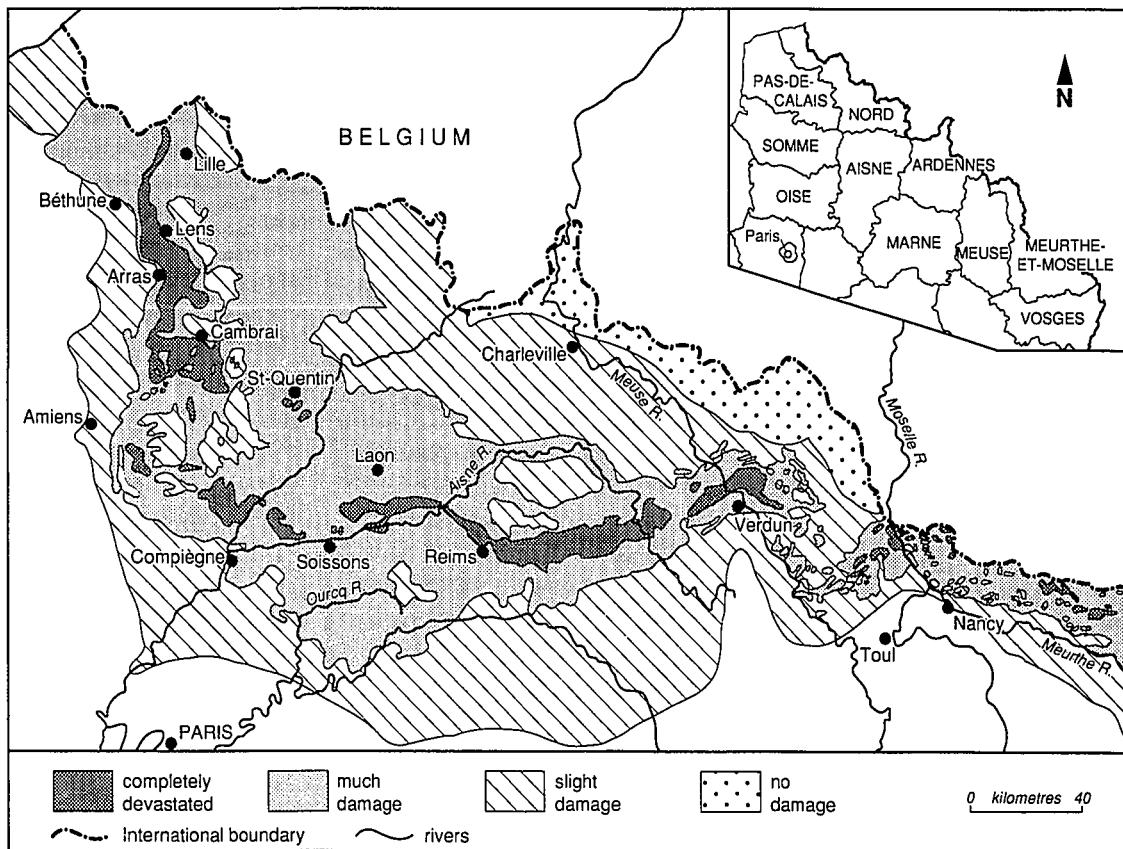


FIGURE 1

Les régions dévastées (compiled from J Guicherd and C Matriot 'La terre des régions dévastées', *Journal d'Agriculture Pratique*, 34, 1921, p 155 and E Michel *Les dommages de guerre et leur réparation*, Paris, 1932, fold-out map)

ous efficiency and the fact that they were run by outsiders, they were to become targets of profound criticism from *sinistrés*, prefects and mayors alike. Military labour and foreign volunteer organizations had already played their role in assisting rural revival during the war.

Just as the destruction of war varied from place to place, so did the challenge of recovery and reconstruction, and the composition and efficiency of the varied agencies. Hostility to the state's special *services* was universal however the practice of restoration varied within the *régions dévastées*. The present discussion focuses on the *département* of Marne which lacked the opulent farmlands of Flanders, Artois or Picardy, but was blessed with vineyards, and cer-

tainly had not experienced the degree of land abandonment that characterized parts of Meuse before the war. Nonetheless, rural areas in Marne (especially around Saint-Menehould and Vitry-le-François) had undergone sustained depopulation in the quarter century before 1914, while the city of Reims grew substantially to house 115,170 in 1911.³ Indeed, the story of post-war recovery in Marne has been largely expressed in terms of the rebuilding of Reims and the influence of the American architect-planner George B Ford.⁴

³ E Chantriot, *La Champagne: étude de géographie régionale*, Paris, 1906, p 84.

⁴ O Rigaud and M Bédarida, *Reims: reconstruction 1920-30*, Reims, 1988; H Clout, 'The reconstruction of Reims 1919-30', *Planning Outlook*, 32, 1989, pp 23-34.

There is, of course, a rural side to that story and it is with the countryside that the present essay is concerned. It does not attempt to explore the enormous and ever-expanding literature on the Great War, but simply seeks to add to knowledge of the surprisingly little-researched recovery period in a single *département* which has a distinctive archival collection highlighting particular aspects of rural reconstitution. In the following pages emphasis is placed on official, public sources rather than on the testimony of the *sinistrés* themselves which stresses the prolonged misery of having to endure temporary accommodation during the first part of the 1920s. However, the author is preparing a monograph which will trace the complex reconstitution of the countryside of northern France from the Channel to the Vosges after the ruins had been cleared, and will include material from local newspapers which reveals the plight and frustration of many of the returned *sinistrés*.

I

German forces entered Marne on 2 September 1914 and reached Reims the following day.⁵ By 7 September the whole *département* had been invaded, with the exception of the southernmost fringe (Fig 2). After the victory of the Marne the Germans retreated, enabling the French army to re-enter Epernay and Vitry-le-François on 11 September, and Reims on the following day. The front line was established across the *département*, running along the Aisne canal, skirting north of Reims and the Châlons army camp, and then extending across the *Champagne pouilleuse* to the woodland of the Argonne where it entered Meuse *département*. For the greater part of the war that line changed very little but at the end of May 1918 the

Germans advanced through the north-western part of the *département* to cross the river Marne between Château-Thierry and Epernay. Despite these movements, the ruined city of Reims was not evacuated. During July German forces were pushed back to the river Aisne and two months later French and American forces started to move north, with the Germans being expelled from Marne one month before the armistice was signed.

At that time the population of the *département* had fallen from 436,000 (1911) to 200,000, largely as a result of refugee movements to neighbouring areas in the French interior and to Paris.⁶ Reims *arrondissement* contained only 5000 inhabitants, compared with 205,000 eight years previously. Sustained shelling had reduced the city to ruins but a few hundred people remained in November 1918. Some 538 *communes* of the 662 in the *département* had experienced material damage. Seven villages had been blasted off the face of the earth; 117 *communes* had over half their buildings devastated, and in a further 414 the proportion ranged from 10 to 50 per cent.⁷ In all, about 94,000 buildings had been destroyed, including 34,000 dwellings. Some 285,000 ha had been abandoned or experienced disruption. On the eve of the war there had been 15,792 wells in what was to become the invaded area; of these 7669 were destroyed, and 7403 needed repair or cleaning since many had been polluted by manure.⁸ Despite efforts to assemble corpses in official cemeteries, many war dead lay in very shallow graves where they had fallen, and hence collection and reburial represented urgent tasks.

Farmland in the battle zone and the

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 366.

⁷ L Paudrat, 'La Marne dévastée et sa reconstitution', in L Lebrun and L Guille, eds, *L'agriculture dans la Marne*, Troyes, 1926, pp 107-13.

⁸ Archives Départementales de la Marne, Châlons-sur-Marne [hereafter ADM], 1N 282, Conseil Général de la Marne, *Session d'avril 1922, Rapport du préfet sur le fonctionnement des services de la reconstitution*, p 820.

⁵ M Huber, *La population de la France pendant la guerre*, Paris, 1931, p 363.

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⁹ *Ibid.*

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occupied areas was largely uncultivated throughout the war. The Germans worked small patches in 1914 and 1915, but they soon abandoned the attempt. Of a total agricultural area of 185,220 ha, some 165,260 ha were judged to have been devastated and a mere 19,960 ha survived intact.⁹ The number of working farms plummeted from 6000 in 1913 to 1272 at the armistice. Voles and other pests multiplied in abandoned tunnels and trenches, and duly invaded weed-covered farmland.¹⁰ No less than 50,000 ha of woodland experienced some kind of devastation, 30,000 ha being in the zone of military operations and the remainder in areas occupied by German or Allied troops.¹¹ However, the aspects of rural change in Marne which distinguished it from the other northern *départements* was the devastation of its prized vineyards.

On the eve of the war the *département* had contained 11,750 ha of vines, 6000 ha of which suffered from phylloxera but continued to produce.¹² The Germans occupied the vineyards for just a few days in September 1914; indeed, they initially respected the vines since they wished to appropriate 'this jewel in the viticultural crown of France'.¹³ But circumstances changed, and shelling, aerial bombardment and drifting gas devastated the Montagne de Reims. Trenches were cut, gun emplacements were installed across sections of vineyard, and vine-growing villages were destroyed during 1918. In addition, mobilization deprived the vineyards of necessary labour; women, children and old men were unable to tend the vines and work the soil in the habitual way. Fertilizers were unobtainable, and insects and plant diseases flourished unchecked; phylloxera

made more progress than in the preceding three decades. Special permits had to be obtained by all who wished to work in the vineyards where, of course, they became easy targets for enemy fire. For this reason the military authorities evacuated most of the vine-growing *communes* during 1918. By the armistice, the vineyards of Marne had declined to 10,600 ha, including 4284 ha where vines had been ripped out or abandoned and 3009 ha which had succumbed to phylloxera but were still producing.¹⁴ In six *communes* vineyards had virtually disappeared, and Verzenay, which had been much visited and admired by tourists, was reduced to an immense stretch of scrub with only 75 ha of its former 500 ha of vines remaining in cultivation.

II

Within Marne the Germans fixed their front line across the woodlands of the Argonne and the chalky plateaux of Champagne, from Vauquois westwards to Reims and thence to the plateau of Craonne, south-east of Laon.¹⁵ This was flanked by trenches and the infrastructure of war which occupied a zone 10–15 km across. Each natural hollow housed military installations. Whole villages were destroyed, as were the meagre plantations of pines which had broken the monotony of some stretches of heath. The very topsoil was blasted away across parts of this swathe of 'red zone', which occupied more than 23,300 ha in northern Marne.¹⁶ Nine months after the armistice, the north-eastern corner of the *département* remained 'a tabula rasa, a silent desert with fields ripped open by shells'.¹⁷ In addition to the land being mutilated, the watercourses of

⁹ *Ibid.*, p 858.

¹⁰ ADM, 1N 280, CG 1921, *Rapport*, p 867.

¹¹ ADM, 1N 278, CG 1920, *Rapport*, p 665.

¹² C Moreau-Bérillon, *Au pays de la Champagne; le vignoble, le vin*, Reims, 1924, p 292.

¹³ M De Polignac, 'Renaissance de la Champagne', *Le Monde Illustré*, 25 septembre 1920, p 16.

¹⁴ Moreau-Bérillon, *Au pays de la Champagne*, p 293.

¹⁵ J Guicherd and C Matriot, 'La terre des régions dévastées', *Journal d'Agriculture Pratique*, 34, 1921, pp 154–6.

¹⁶ ADM, 1N 280, CG 1921, *Rapport*, p 846.

¹⁷ Anon, 'La Marne', *Journal des Régions Dévastées*, 1, 1919, p 198.

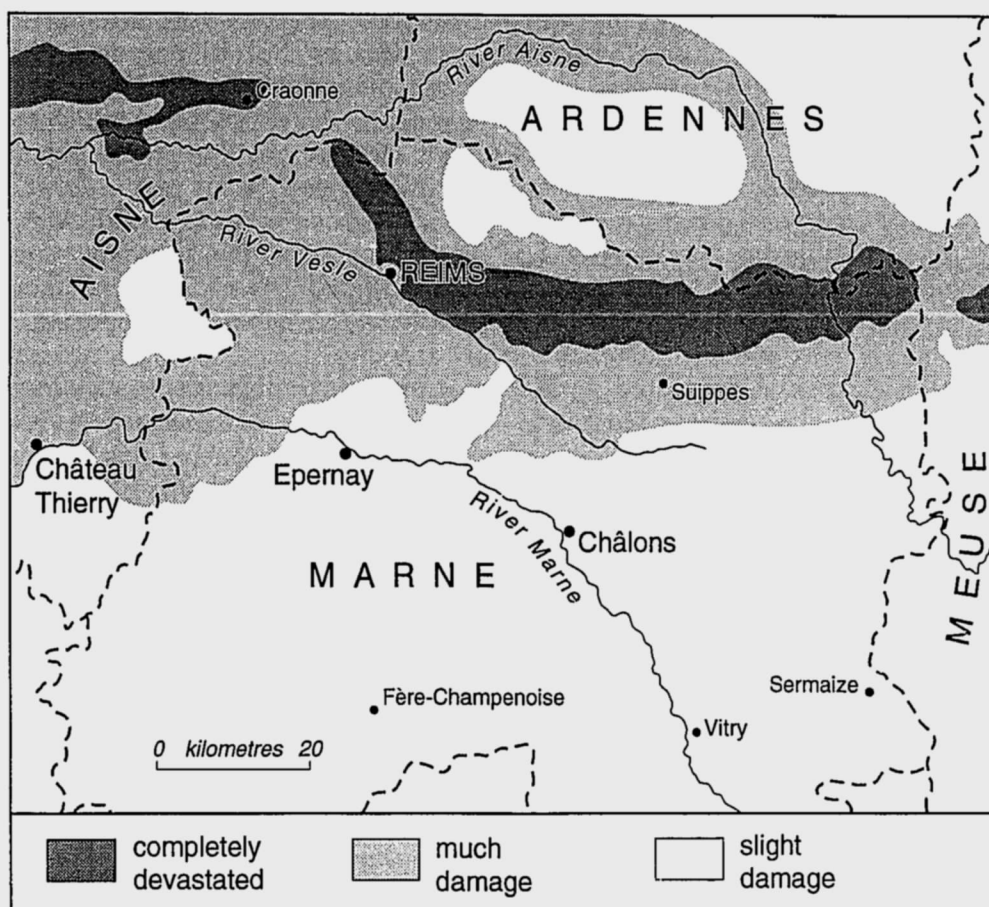


FIGURE 2

Devastation in the *département* of Marne (sources as for Fig 1)

Marne received a deadly quantity of unexploded shells. By April 1921, 600 tonnes were to be recovered from the bed of the Vesle but many stretches still demanded attention.¹⁸

Four zones of destruction could be recognized within the *département*¹⁹ (Fig 2):

i) The northernmost section had been invaded throughout the war and over 80 per cent of its buildings had been destroyed or damaged. Seven villages had been erased, and farmland was scored with trenches and littered with war debris. It was completely uncultivated in November

1918. In the words of the Bishop of Châlons, who had visited the environs of Somme-Py in October, the area was 'an absolute desert, without water, people or vegetation ... the land is colourless and is just like the corpse of a *pays*'.²⁰

ii) Further west, four *cantons* (Fismes, Ville-en-Tardenois, Dormans, Châtillon-sur-Marne) had been invaded during 1914 but were reoccupied by farming families when the Germans retreated. A second invasion in 1918 proved more destructive than the first, hence 50–80 per cent of all buildings suffered damage.

iii) A band of territory 10–20 km in bre-

¹⁸ ADM, 1N 280, CG 1921, *Rapport*, p 801.

¹⁹ Paudrat, 'La Marne dévastée', pp 107–8.

²⁰ M Tissier, *Au front de Champagne*, Châlons, 1918, p 19.

adth fringed the two previous zones. Enemy artillery fire led to 30–50 per cent of buildings being damaged.

iv) The southern half of the *département* experienced only brief enemy occupation in 1914 when farmers were evacuated and cultivation was suspended in this 'back zone'. In 1915 many cultivators returned and, with the help of military labour, stretches of land that had not been too churned up and from which explosives could be removed were returned to use. Between 10 and 30 per cent of buildings in the 'back zone' suffered damage.

III

In Marne, as elsewhere in the *régions dévastées*, rural recovery began long before hostilities ceased. Whenever events allowed, French and Allied forces were employed to cultivate farmland that lay beyond the line of fire and was not dangerously strewn with war debris. For example, during 1915 troops loaned their horses to farmers, worked in the fields and helped repair farm buildings in the southern half of Marne. During the following two years special 'agricultural officers' were charged with exploring all possible ways of using military resources to bring the land in the shadow of battle back into cultivation. *Comités d'action agricole* were established for the whole *département* and for individual *communes* to advise farmers how and where they might obtain animals, seeds and fertilizers.²¹ They served as clearing houses for complaints and requests from farmers for transmission to military or civilian administrations; and they organized labour and equipment for recultivating abandoned land. Committees from neighbouring *communes* were urged to assume responsibility for reworking uncultivated areas in evacuated *communes*.

The army participated as best it could in farming activities but its work was conditioned by the official status and material condition of land at varying distances from the active front line. The supply zone (*zone des étapes*) in Marne comprised considerable areas that had been withdrawn from agricultural use when artillery depots, training camps, aviation fields and firing ranges were installed.²² It did, however, retain some of its civilian population and was divided into sectors, each of which was entrusted to a 'farming officer' who had been a farmer or a professor of agriculture in civilian life. He would liaise with local farmers to determine the type and quantity of work they wished to be done, and with the military command to ascertain how many men, horses and machines might be released for particular periods and at specified places. As well as drafting groups of soldiers to undertake haymaking, harvesting, threshing and woodcutting, some military units placed individual soldiers on farms for longer periods where labour shortages were acute because of mobilization or where widows were struggling to work the land alone. Such efforts were generally appreciated, but available military labour was insufficient to meet all demands and was subject to immediate recall because of changing circumstances. This could, of course, prejudice sowing, harvesting and other work which had to be performed according to the agricultural calendar rather than as the events of war would allow. Harsh weather produced further complications, as in the winter of 1917, when very poor conditions prevented soldiers from undertaking any farm work.

Closer to the front line the 'reserved zone' was divided into 'forward' and 'back' areas. Civilian authorities continued to operate in the back areas where military labour was used to support civilian farm-

²¹ ADM, 140 M 17, *Comités départemental et communaux d'action agricole pour la remise en culture des terres abandonnées*, 12 février 1916.

²² ADM, 203 M 199, *Rapport sur les résultats obtenus au cours de l'année 1917 avec l'aide agricole des troupes*, 25 décembre 1917.

workers whose numbers had declined greatly because of mobilization and voluntary migration. Farming officers instructed mayors to encourage local farmers to work the land as best they could and to requisition abandoned areas for cultivation by neighbouring farmers or by the army.²³ Extreme care had to be exercised, and farmers were advised to summon the military to remove shells or other suspect material.²⁴ By contrast, all civilians had been evacuated from the forward areas and hence the army was required to supply labour, animals, implements and machines. Wherever possible abandoned farm equipment was numbered and labelled, prior to being put into store or pressed into service by soldiers.²⁵ Blacksmiths from the cavalry corps proved particularly useful for repairing field equipment.

Relations between the military and what remained of the civilian farming population in Marne were not always comfortable. Local people complained that some teams of soldiers allocated to farming duties failed to live up to expectations, preferring to rest or to ride horses rather than work in the fields.²⁶ The army acknowledged that sometimes it failed to supply workers with the right skills, at the right moment and for the appropriate duration. However, it argued that some farmers refused the offer of military aid or, having accepted it, turned it away on the pretext that the land or the crop was not ready. Others expected unreasonably large amounts of work to be done by soldiers in very short periods. More seriously, some farming officers alleged that many civilians in the back areas of Marne had simply become camp followers, preferring to devote their time to trade and to leave agricultural tasks to soldiers.

Prisoners of war were used to help with

farming work in areas more than 30 km from the front line. As the war approached its final stages, the *Ministère de l'Agriculture* repeated its requests for military manpower to be allocated to harvesting and threshing.²⁷ At the same time, military authorities urged prefects to treat with caution any requests from civilians to return to their devastated farmland, since so much dangerous material remained on the ground. In September 1918 the *Ministère des Régions Libérées* informed mayors to draw up emergency plans for using military labour should it suddenly become available in their area. Once the armistice had been signed Foch instructed that occupied land be returned to cultivation. Armed forces were encouraged to quit buildings that might be of use to farmers and other residents; and civilian authorities were authorized to remove barbed wire and to fill trenches. Peace opened the way for the state's emergency services to play a significant but not uncontroversial role in tackling these and many other urgent tasks.

IV

Throughout the hostilities and in the immediate post-war months many French and foreign voluntary associations busied themselves with welfare activities and rural reconstruction in the shadow of the war zone. Of particular interest in Marne is the work of the British Society of Friends (Quakers) who sent a group of thirty-two doctors, nurses and helpers to the *département* in November 1914.²⁸ In the following month a start was made on medical relief, installing new wells and temporary housing, and building anew.²⁹ A medical welfare centre was opened at Châlons, and 150 Quakers were at work in Marne by the summer of 1915. An initial idea had

²³ ADM, 140 M 17, *Service de la culture des terres*, 18 septembre 1917.

²⁴ ADM, 140 M 16, *Mise en culture des terres abandonnées*, 11 octobre 1918.

²⁵ ADM, 140 M 17, *Mise en culture des terres abandonnées*, 18 novembre 1917.

²⁶ ADM, 203 M 199, *Rapport sur les résultats obtenus ...* 1917.

²⁷ ADM, 140 M 16, *Mise en culture des terres abandonnées*, 27 juillet 1918.

²⁸ T E Harvey, *Behind the Battle Lines in France*, 1915, p 3.

²⁹ J M Guillon, 'Mission anglaise de la Société des Amis', *Journal d'Agriculture Pratique*, 29, 1916, pp 92-4.

been to repair housing but soon the initiative was taken to produce temporary wooden houses.³⁰ These were for erection in villages around Vitry-le-François and Fère-Champenoise which had been devastated in the Battle of the Marne.³¹ At Vitry the Quakers took on civilian labour to help construct prefabricated wooden shelters. The first was ready for occupation at Christmas 1914, and applications for this kind of temporary accommodation flooded in from local mayors. The Quakers paid particular attention to Sermaize-les-Bains, which had lost 900 of its thousand houses but was just one of a line of ruined settlements between Vitry and Revigny. Work continued during 1915 and over a thousand wooden houses formed a 'little garden city' at Sermaize.³² During 1917 the town came under fire again, but this time it survived.

Some 65 km to the west and across the main battlefield of the Marne, Fère-Champenoise formed a second focus of activity by the Friends. The town itself had not suffered grave damage but many surrounding villages were half destroyed. Relief began in January 1915 with Quakers going out to organize rebuilding, offer material help and supply seeds so that some kind of harvest might be obtained. The little wooden houses varied in size from one to four rooms, were supplied with double walls and plank floors, and were covered with tarred roofing felt. Later on, tiles were used since these were far more effective. Quakers continued their emergency work in Marne but were repeatedly frustrated by lack of timber, despite support from the prefect and his staff. In the summer of 1916 the French authorities opened workshops for prefabricating wooden houses at Dôle (Jura) and Ornans (Doubs), and both supplied prefabricated

parts to the Quakers in Marne. Important though the work of voluntary organizations was in particular locations, the complex task of rural recovery demanded much better organization, more labour, and greater financial support.

V

The early months and years of peace are best characterized by the direct involvement of the state which organized labour to perform a range of emergency tasks. Special *services* were set up, some originating before the war had ended and others immediately after. Three of these were of particular significance for rural recovery in the *régions dévastées*.

The *Service des Travaux de Première Urgence* (STPU) emerged from earlier military organizations, being formally designated on 13 December 1918. It was centralized in Paris and was directed along quasi-military lines. It could be called upon to undertake various forms of emergency work, such as removing shells and dangerous equipment, providing makeshift repairs to damaged housing, installing temporary accommodation, clearing rubble, levelling farmland, filling trenches, and performing a host of other tasks that were usually identified by the local staff of the *Génie Rural*. The STPU was trying to operate at the most difficult of times and was to be subjected to profound criticism. By virtue of its centralization it was beyond the jurisdiction of the prefect who was, of course, responsible for organizing other closely related work. In short, the STPU was managed by outsiders, whose ideas were rarely in harmony with those of the *sinistrés*, and it called upon a diverse labour force which, its critics alleged, was not committed to the tasks in hand.

By March 1919 Colonel Abinal, director of the STPU in Marne, had assembled an initial labour force of civilians and 600 prisoners of war but he declared it to be

³⁰ A R Fry, *A Quaker Adventure*, 1943, p 23.

³¹ E M Pye, *Relief Work in the Devastated Department of the Marne*, 1915, p 9.

³² J O Greenwood, *Quaker Encounters*, York, 1975, p 203; G Bluzet, *Reconstitution des moyens d'habitation dans les villages détruits*, Châlons, 1916, p 7.

quite insufficient to cope with the work ahead.³³ Nonetheless its activities were to complement those of private contractors and made an important contribution to local achievements. Thus, by 1 April 1919, 30,000 ha had been purged of shells; barbed wire had been cleared and trenches cursorily filled over 18,000 ha; about 8000 ha of farmland had been ploughed; almost 4000 houses had been given summary repairs; and an extremely small number of temporary shelters had been erected. Just forty-three were listed for the Châlons sector, and a small but unspecified number that were necessary for canteens, dormitories and prisoner-of-war camps had been installed around Reims. One year later 194,799 ha had been cleared of shells and barbed wire, and trenches had been filled across 167,782 ha.³⁴ These operations involved shifting 15,405,930 m³ of earth and 31,815,903 m² of barbed wire. Despite such achievements, opposition to the STPU was so strong in the northern *départements* that after a visit to Somme in the summer of 1919 Clemenceau announced that the STPU would be replaced by the *Service des Travaux de l'Etat* (STE).

This proved to be little more than a change in name since many staff remained. However, the days of the STE were numbered and the repatriation of prisoners of war in the second half of 1919 removed much of its *raison d'être*. It was disbanded in spring 1920 and the kinds of work that it had undertaken were entrusted to private contractors and to *sinistrés* operating individually or in groups. Replacement supplies of labour were certainly needed, and by this time a transit camp had been opened at Suippes to receive foreign workers destined for Aisne and Ardennes as well as Marne. In April 1920 the first convoy of Poles had just arrived.³⁵ The presence of many outsiders from other parts of France

and from abroad caused the *département* administration 'legitimate concern', and Prefect Brisac took steps to reinforce his mobile police, increase the number of gendarmes, and create a special force to protect *sinistrés* and their belongings. These officers were provided with bicycles or motorcycles, and patrolled the devastated countryside night and day, checking the identity of strangers, informing mayors and gendarmes, and keeping an eye on local people and their property.

The *Service de la Motoculture* also derived from military origins, in conformity with the law of 7 April 1917 which encouraged cultivation of abandoned farmland. It was composed of teams of tractors and other agricultural machines which were used to level war-torn land and provide initial ploughing. In many respects this *service* had to depend on the STPU, since shells and other debris had to be removed, and trenches and shellholes filled before the tractors could be brought in. Priority was given to rich soils in broad open stretches of relatively flat countryside. Such conditions were well satisfied in Aisne but were less prevalent in Marne with its extensive area of poor soils in the *Champagne crayeuse*.³⁶

Six teams of tractors were operating in the *département* during the spring of 1919, and a very small number of other machines were being used by groups of farmers or by individuals.³⁷ Twelve months later 107 *Motoculture* machines were operating in eight teams.³⁸ As a result of the activities of the *Service de la Motoculture*, individual farmers and agricultural cooperatives, the uncultivated surface of Marne was reduced from 120,359 ha to 81,500 ha during the first four months of 1920 but a vast amount of abandoned land still awaited attention. During 1920 the *Service* used 192 machines which contributed to the ploughing of

³³ ADM, 1N 276, CG 1919, *Rapport*, p 154.

³⁴ ADM, 1N 278, CG 1920, *Rapport*, p 611.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p 613.

³⁶ Chantriot, *La Champagne*, 1906, p 122.

³⁷ ADM, 1N 276, CG 1919, *Rapport*, p 168.

³⁸ ADM, 1N 278, CG 1920, *Rapport*, p 641.

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7745 ha, working of a further 2255 ha, and harvesting from 2179 ha.³⁹ As elsewhere in the *régions dévastées*, its achievements were poor, partly as a result of the state of the land but also because machinery wore out and spares were not available. Because of bitter opposition from farming organizations, the *Service* was dissolved at the end of August 1921 and its tractors were sold to local farmers with large enough holdings to use them.⁴⁰ Its total activity in Marne amounted to ploughing 23,467 ha, surface working a further 6246 ha, harvesting over 3682 ha, and threshing for a total of 335 days.

The *Office de Reconstitution Agricole* (ORA) was the third rural emergency service. It was created on 6 August 1917 and functioned as a centralized body to encourage agricultural recovery. Through its local agency, the *Union agricole, horticole et viticole de la Marne* which started operations in April 1919, it attempted to co-ordinate collection, repair and distribution of abandoned farm machinery, and ordered new equipment from French and overseas suppliers, especially the USA.⁴¹ A centre for repairing farm machinery had been opened at Châlons in spring 1919 and was duly brought under ORA control. The centre developed slowly and counted a workforce of thirty-five a year later, including civilians and military staff. The ORA advised on the creation of farming cooperatives (eight of which were established in Marne), and functioned as a clearing house for seeds and fertilizers and for livestock that were returned from Belgium and the French interior, were obtained from Germany in conformity with international agreements, or were purchased from other sources. During 1920 the ORA handled the return of 945 horses, 3255 cattle, 5698 sheep and 452 goats from Germany.⁴² Unfortunately disease was rife

and only about half of these animals survived to the end of the year. The *Union agricole* delivered 14,000 pieces of farm equipment to farmers in Marne, including 3000 ploughs and 425 tractors.⁴³ Like other emergency organizations, the ORA was criticized for inefficiency and the *Union agricole* was shown to have been poorly managed, with financial matters being particularly defective. Like the other *services*, the ORA and its various agencies were closed ignominiously and in Marne the *Union agricole* ceased trading in July 1923.

In addition to these agricultural *services*, the state established a forestry organization to help restore 50,000 ha of woodland in Marne. It opened camps in the Montagne de Reims, in the Forêt des Hauts Batis and at Florent, and by April 1920 work had begun on removing barbed wire from the woodlands of the Argonne and was about to commence near Reims. Nurseries were opened in the *département* to supply the necessary plants.⁴⁴

VI

It is not possible to quantify the achievements of the state services during the emergency phase. Statistics from the *Ministère des Régions Libérées* are both rare and unreliable, and do not distinguish between work accomplished by the state and that achieved by *sinistrés* acting individually or in groups. However, five indicators may be identified for a variety of dates in the early 1920s which roughly mark the end of the emergency phase. Firstly, by the start of January 1921, 57 per cent of all the land that would be purged of shells, trenches, barbed wire and other war debris in Marne over the subsequent ten years had been cleared.⁴⁵ Three-

³⁹ ADM, 1N 280, CG 1921, *Rapport*, p 870.

⁴⁰ ADM, 1N 282, CG 1922, *Rapport*, p 862.

⁴¹ ADM, 1N 276, CG 1919, *Rapport*, p 168.

⁴² ADM, 1N 280, CG 1921, *Rapport*, p 860.

⁴³ Paudrat, 'La Marne dévastée', p 112.

⁴⁴ ADM, 1N 278, CG 1920, *Rapport*, p 665.

⁴⁵ Ministère des Travaux Publics: Service des Régions Libérées, *La reconstitution de la France dévastée: statistique générale*, Paris, 1929; Michel, *Les dommages de guerre*, p 612.

quarters of this work had been completed across the ten *départements* as a whole, and was almost entirely finished in Oise, Pas-de-Calais, Somme and Ardennes. Secondly, at the same date, 54 per cent of all war-damaged farmland in Marne had been levelled and had received its first ploughing. Since the *Service de la Motoculture* continued to operate into 1921 it may be more appropriate to cite figures for January 1922. At that time 65 per cent had been completed in Marne, which was behind the 75 per cent average for the ten *départements* and the very high completion rates for the rich farmlands of Nord (99 per cent) and Pas-de-Calais (86 per cent). Thirdly, the volume of temporary housing installed and the quantity of damaged housing repaired was not summarized until October 1922, four whole years after the armistice. At that time 14,146 temporary houses and farm buildings made of timber and makeshift materials had been installed, and 18,050 damaged houses and farm buildings had been made usable.⁴⁶ These results appear particularly unsatisfactory when set against the 82,560 houses and farm buildings that Michel quoted as having been destroyed or damaged in Marne and the fact that many *sinistrés* had returned to their home districts but were required to live in temporary shelters.⁴⁷ (It must, of course, be acknowledged that 11,617 houses and 3509 farm buildings had received permanent repairs in Marne by October 1922, and a modest total of 2789 houses and farm buildings had been reconstructed; but these achievements were in no way the responsibility of the emergency services). Fourthly, the census of March 1921 recorded a civilian population of 366,734 in Marne, some 16 per cent below the 1911 figure.⁴⁸ The *cantons* of Châlons

and Epernay recorded fractionally more residents than in 1911 but population decline characterized the rest of the *département*, with particularly severe losses around Reims, Saint-Menehould and Vitry-le-François. Many owners and tenant farmers had come back but the same could not be said for landless agricultural labourers who had no incentive to return when more lucrative work might be found elsewhere.⁴⁹ The situation regarding farm labour was grave, especially with regard to essential springtime activities. Lastly, in the hot, dry season of 1921, the wheat harvest in the *département* exceeded the pre-war average but fell back to about three-quarters in the following year.⁵⁰ In 1922 the number of farm horses in Marne was only 14 per cent short of the pre-war total, but numbers of cattle (—23 per cent) and sheep (—54 per cent) were substantially down.

Despite much inefficiency and local variation, the special services, private contractors and *sinistrés* did manage to accomplish a great deal. By the end of 1921 shells had been removed from 244,555 ha and barbed wire cleared and trenches filled over 212,830 ha.⁵¹ Land in agricultural use rose from 19,260 ha in 1919 to 81,868 ha in 1921, and was to reach 98,000 ha in the summer of 1922, when the number of working farms would exceed 5000. By the spring of that year ruins had been cleared from seventy-eight *communes* and work was in progress in a further hundred. Some 6019 wells had been restored, 6251 cleaned (4555 of which had been disinfected), and 316 reconstructed completely. At that time 7943 units of temporary housing had been installed, including 4185 wooden shelters and 3758 'provisional' houses, which together provided some kind of shelter for about 30,000 people.

Like property owners elsewhere in the

⁴⁶ Ministère des Régions Libérées, *L'oeuvre de la reconstitution*, Paris, 1923.

⁴⁷ Michel, *Les dommages de guerre*, p 269.

⁴⁸ Ministère de l'Intérieur, *Denombrement de la Population*, 1921, Paris, 1922.

⁴⁹ ADM, 1N 280, CG 1921, *Rapport*, p 866.

⁵⁰ Ministère de l'Agriculture, *Statistiques agricoles annuelles, 1910-1928*, Paris, 1911-29.

⁵¹ ADM, 1N 282, CG 1922, *Rapport*, p 830.

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régions dévastées, the vinegrowers of Marne returned as soon as possible to the devastated plots, seeking shelter amidst ruins or in temporary accommodation.⁵² Initially a sum of 3000 francs was advanced to help compensate for each hectare of vines that had been destroyed or damaged. This sum was soon increased to 5000 francs and then 8000 francs for vineyards that had to be replanted completely.⁵³ During 1919 land was cleared and dug over, trenches and shellholes filled, dead vines removed, living ones pruned, and necessary chemicals applied. Indeed, 10,000 vinegrowers in Marne belonged to over a hundred syndicates for tackling phylloxera.⁵⁴ Encouraged by the *Syndicat Général des Vignerons de la Champagne Délimitée* and assisted financially by the *Association Viticole Champenoise*, vinegrowers prepared the soils and made 6 million grafts in 1919 and 14 million in 1920. During that year Marne contained 10,325 ha of vines, including 3184 ha which supported grafted stock. But vinegrowers suffered severe difficulties, including an acute shortage of labour which had been attracted to other forms of recovery work. Implements, chemicals and other materials were much more expensive than before the war. To restore a hectare of vineyard now cost 25–30,000 francs, compared with 7–8000 francs seven years previously. Not surprisingly, the grape harvest of 1921 was insignificant but that of 1922 was very abundant. Ironically prohibition had been introduced in the USA, but during 1923 the Champagne trade revived and consumption both at home and abroad was picking up.⁵⁵ By spring 1923 only 590 ha of war-ravaged vineyards in Marne awaited replanting and a further 468 ha needed to be restored after wartime devastation.

VII

Land continued to be cleared and recultivated up to the mid-1920s. However, state services had long been dissolved and arguably during 1921–22 the ‘emergency phase’ had been succeeded by the ‘recovery phase’. Attention turned to the desperate plight of many returnees and the need to build permanent dwellings that would ensure that northern settlements were not condemned to be rural slums or ghost towns. Throughout the war, architects had devised plans for reconstructing urban and rural settlements and for improving living conditions for their inhabitants. Community facilities, such as village halls, libraries and dispensaries, were advocated for settlements which needed complete reconstruction. New villages should be less densely packed than their predecessors and be provided with more open space. Cemeteries should be relocated on settlement margins and every effort be made to provide public water supply, mains drainage and electricity. Most authors argued that traditional ‘regional’ styles should be respected, although modern materials, especially concrete, might be included in rebuilt houses and farmsteads.⁵⁶

On 14 March 1919, a settlement planning law was introduced to apply to all towns with over 10,000 inhabitants, to towns greater than 5000 that were growing rapidly, and to all settlements that had been damaged or destroyed during the war. In each case a *plan d'aménagement* was required and this opened the way for the villages of northern France to be reconstructed in more logical and hygienic ways. Whilst defining the intensely individualistic dimension of declaring war losses and claiming compensation, the *dommages de guerre* legislation (17 April 1919) did not preclude *sinistrés* working together to achieve these ends. Clearly, groups of *sin-*

⁵² Moreau-Bérillon, *Au pays de la Champagne*, p 293.

⁵³ ADM, 1N 282, CG 1922, *Rapport*, p 864.

⁵⁴ De Polignac, ‘Renaissance de la Champagne’, p 16.

⁵⁵ G Chappaz, *Le vignoble et le vin de Champagne*, Paris, 1951, p 111; ADM, 1N 284, CG 1923, *Rapport*, p 737.

⁵⁶ J Brissac, *Conseils sur les principales dispositions relatives à l'hygiène dans les projets de reconstruction*, Châlons, 1922.

istrés might agree to pool the advances on their compensation grants, employ architects and building contractors, and thereby reconstruct whole settlements at a time. Several models already existed which might be adapted to create *sociétés coopératives de reconstruction*. A handful of such groupings had been founded in 1917 to rebuild flood-damaged settlements in the Marne valley and during 1918 the *Ministère des Régions Libérées* extolled the advantages of cooperation. In the following years *sociétés coopératives de reconstruction* developed in various ways, with the lead being taken by socially-committed priests in Meurthe-et-Moselle, by mayors and landowners in Aisne, and by farmers' associations in Nord. Passage of the *dommages de guerre* legislation made establishing cooperatives all the more desirable since architects and building contractors from Paris and elsewhere started to descend on the devastated settlements, anxious to draw up contracts and secure work. Many were honest but some were not; naïve *sinistrés* proved easy prey for exploitation.

In Marne, 25 cooperative reconstruction societies involving 65 *communes* had been set up by 1 August 1919, and at the start of April 1920 the figure had risen to 129 involving 210 *communes*.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, many did not function efficiently since they lacked a consistent legal basis and could be joined or abandoned by their members at will. Prefect Brisac estimated that only about fifty were truly 'alive', representing the interests of *sinistrés* in a hundred *communes*.⁵⁸ Legislation of 15 August 1920 introduced the notion of the 'approved cooperative' whereby associations agreed to follow government guidelines and were allocated financial advances to assist their activities. By 1 March 1922, 141 cooperatives were in existence in Marne, of which 137 had approved status.

These belonged to two *unions* (covering rural areas of Reims *arrondissement* and the valley of the Marne) and to the *fédération départementale*.⁵⁹ The total continued to grow, reaching 148 in 1924 with a membership of 12,557 in 262 *communes*.⁶⁰ Some 167 *communes* had engaged their local cooperatives to repair communal buildings, especially churches and *mairies*, and 75 *communes* belonged to a diocesan cooperative for church restoration. Staff of the *Génie Rural* visited the cooperatives on a regular basis to check their accounting and the progress of building being undertaken on their behalf. Despite these precautions, the reconstruction cooperatives suffered from serious financial difficulties, partly as a result of local mismanagement but also because central authorities were unable to ensure adequate cash flow.⁶¹ Thus, in 1925 finances proved insufficient and many building sites in renascent villages had to stop work, albeit temporarily.

The activities of the reconstruction cooperatives are not known in detail, but by 1931 some had completed their work since the total in the *département* stood at 120, with a membership of 12,083.⁶² Approximately three-fifths of all reconstruction in Marne was due to their activities and they played a particularly vital role in rebuilding many of the villages of northern Marne. These were endowed with wider streets, new or restored churches, schools and *mairies*, but rather fewer dwelling houses, partly because compensation was used to rationalize the housing pattern and also because some *sinistrés* opted not to return to their home villages. Rural electrification was a major innovation which was introduced with the assistance of the *Génie Rural*. Work started toward the end of 1921 and by the spring of 1923 electricity supplies reached 82 *communes*.

⁵⁷ ADM, 1N 278, CG 1920, *Rapport*, p 633.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ ADM, 1N 282, CG 1922, *Rapport*, p 854.

⁶⁰ ADM, 1N 286, CG 1924, *Rapport*, p 695.

⁶¹ ADM, 1N 290, CG 1926, *Rapport*, p 223.

⁶² Michel, *Les dommages de guerre*, p 612.

Three years later the total stood at 238, with work in progress in a further hundred *communes*.⁶³

The old cadastral pattern of farm property was restored over the greater part of the northern *départements*, with relatively few landowners opting for plot consolidation (*remembrement*) under the generous legislation of 4 March 1919 which related specifically to war-damaged areas. Only a very small number of *communes* in Marne requested their landholdings be remodelled, and often these involved villages which had established farm cooperatives to bring devastated farmland back into use.⁶⁴ Prefect Brisac noted that few landowners appreciated the advantages that *remembrement* offered, but he observed that the objections they raised were not important and could be refuted easily. By April 1923 *remembrement* had been completed in just a dozen *communes* in Marne, covering 7396 ha.⁶⁵ By the start of 1926, 15,564 ha had been consolidated involving 3126 landowners and reducing the number of their plots from 57,021 to 12,952 (–77 per cent). This modest result stood in sharp contrast with the sustained effort at *remembrement* in eastern Somme. Ironically, some landowners in devastated parts of Marne only began to appreciate the advantages of *remembrement* once neighbouring *communes* had been reorganized. As late as 1931 some were still requesting that *remembrement* be implemented under the 1919 legislation; unfortunately, such requests had to be lodged before the end of 1922.⁶⁶

In the disruption and despair of November 1918 it had seemed that broad areas of ravaged land were beyond hope of restoration. The idea of taking this land into state ownership to establish a kind of national shrine gained favour in Paris once

the *dommages de guerre* legislation had been passed in the following spring.⁶⁷ This enabled the state to purchase land that was deemed unworthy of reclamation and to offer compensation to those who would be dispossessed. During the summer and autumn of 1919 the staff of the topographic bureau of the *Service de la Reconstitution Foncière*, assisted by the *Génie Rural*, undertook preliminary surveys. Local landowners reacted with horror, and in August 1919 disconsolate farmers in north-eastern Marne complained that the emergency services had done nothing to help them and that lack of temporary accommodation prevented them from starting to reclaim their ravaged fields.⁶⁸ This reaction was echoed in ruined villages throughout the liberated regions as farmers refused to believe that their long-cherished soil could be condemned to irrevocable sterility. Following President Millerand's visit to the 'red zone' in August 1920 and his attentive response to evidence from the mouths of the *sinistrés* of their willingness to restore their homes and their land, prefects were instructed to reappraise the extent of the 'red zone'.

Its initial extent in Marne involved over 23,000 ha and remained unchanged in the mid-1920s, reflecting both the severity of devastation and the poverty of the soil. The *département* did not experience the kind of reclamation programme that operated elsewhere in northern France, with the painful exception of Meuse. The 'red zone' of Marne embraced three dozen *communes* which had been occupied by the enemy for the duration of the war. Some villages had been destroyed without trace and in places the topsoil was 'pure chalk, completely without vegetation'.⁶⁹ Following a ministerial decision of January 1922, the state proceeded to purchase compulsorily three large blocks of land

⁶³ L. Lebrun and L. Guille, eds, *L'agriculture dans la Marne*, Troyes, 1926, p. 104.

⁶⁴ ADM, 1N 282, CG 1922, *Rapport*, p. 856.

⁶⁵ ADM, 1N 284, CG 1923, *Rapport*, p. 753.

⁶⁶ ADM, 153 M 18, *Remembrement, commune d'Ormes*, 23 mars 1931.

⁶⁷ Michel, *Les dommages de guerre*, p. 207.

⁶⁸ Anon, 'La Marne', *Journal des Régions Dévastées*, 1, 1919, p. 98.

⁶⁹ Paudrat, 'La Marne dévastée', p. 108.

(Moronviller, Tahure and La Gruerie) which totalled 24,541 ha.⁷⁰ As elsewhere in the northern *départements*, this action provoked severe opposition from local farmers who sought to re-acquire their property.⁷¹ The *département* administration reiterated its belief that about 10,000 ha were too damaged and inherently poor to be brought back into agricultural use. Local landowners continued to argue their case and by early 1926 they had managed to repurchase over 2300 ha which they returned to agricultural use.⁷² In contrast, 8000 ha of devastated chalky soils were confirmed as beyond hope of restoration and were allocated to the military camp at Suippes.⁷³

VIII

The census of 1931 recorded 412,156 inhabitants in Marne, rather more than in 1926 (397,773) but fewer than on the eve of the war (436,310). Only the *cantons* of Châlons, Reims, Vitry-le-François and Suippes (with its military base) housed more people than twenty years previously.⁷⁴ Depopulation affected not only the former battlefield but also many rural parts of the *département*. In 1931, twenty-one of the thirty-three *cantons* contained fewer residents than five years previously. The most extreme case was the *canton* of Ville-sur-Tourbe (near Saint-Menhould) which housed only half of its pre-war population. Not surprisingly, the agricultural population of the *département* shrank, from 85,640 in 1911 to 69,205 in 1931, as commercial, industrial and public-service work increased. Foreigners were more than twice as numerous in 1931 (22,213) as on the eve of war (9769), and their share of

the population of Marne grew from 2.2 per cent to 5.4 per cent. Even so, these percentages were far below the average for the ten northern *départements* (5.3 and 10.3 per cent respectively).

Agricultural recovery had continued throughout the 1920s, and the overall composition of agricultural activity in Marne also changed. After peaking in 1922 the amount of land under the plough declined to stand at 86 per cent of the pre-war average in 1930.⁷⁵ As restocking occurred the number of farm horses continued to rise but in 1930 was still 10 per cent short of the pre-war figure. Mechanization and rising yields meant that wheat output in the late 1920s equalled and in some years exceeded the pre-war figure. Traditional forms of sheep rearing recovered only in part, with the total for 1930 being but 60 per cent of that twenty years earlier. By contrast, cattle numbers continued to rise throughout the 1920s and equalled the pre-war average at the end of the decade.

In 1930 the countryside of Marne contained fewer people and fewer houses than on the eve of the war. Cooperative reconstruction societies continued their work but by far the greater part of rural Marne bore the imprint of restoration. Complete reconstruction was widespread in many northern *communes*. However, with the exception of *remembrement*, electrification, reorganized village plans and a few other features, the opportunity for drastically reshaping the countryside had not been taken, even though some agricultural experts had urged its desirability in the light of France's rapidly declining supply of farm labour. As elsewhere in the *régions dévastées*, the recovery process in rural Marne involved a reinvention of the past. But, of course, this proved impossible in its seven lost villages and over the desolate stretches of what remained of the 'red

⁷⁰ ADM, 1N 282, CG 1922, *Rapport*, p 858.

⁷¹ ADM, 1N 284, CG 1923, *Rapport*, p 753.

⁷² ADM, 1N 290, CG 1926, *Rapport*, p 250.

⁷³ G Clause, 'La lutte contre le déclin 1870-1950', in M Crubellier, ed, *Histoire de la Champagne*, Toulouse, 1975, p 405.

⁷⁴ Ministère de l'Intérieur, *Dénombrement de la Population 1931*, Paris, 1932.

⁷⁵ M Hau, *La croissance économique de la Champagne de 1810 à 1969*, Paris, 1976, p 57.

zone'. Across the greater part of the *département* it seemed as if the 'cyclone' had left no lasting trace; however, the stunning

testimony of the *monuments aux morts* and the broken lives they commemorated serve to correct that myth.

Notes and Comments

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FORTHCOMING CONFERENCES

The BAHS holds three conferences a year. The first is its annual residential spring conference held at a different location each year in early April. The second is a one-day conference on a local history theme on a Saturday in September, again at a different location each year. The final conference is also a one-day conference which is held at the Institute of Historical Research, Senate House, University of London on the first Saturday in December.

The Society's next conference will be in the Institute of Historical Research, University of London on Saturday 3 December 1994. The theme will be 'Social Relationships in the Countryside'. A booking form is included with this issue of the *Review* and should be returned together with the conference fee to the organizer, Dr Peter Dewey, Department of History, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX. The 1995 Spring Conference will be at the University of Sheffield from Monday 10 to Wednesday 12 April. The local organizer is Professor David Hey, Division of Adult Continuing Education, 196-198 West Street, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S1 4ET. The 1995 Autumn Conference will be held in the south of England and will be organized by Dr Richard Hoyle of the University of Central Lancashire. Looking ahead to

1996, the Spring Conference will probably be held at Roehampton (Surrey). The local organizer is Dr Peter Edwards, Department of History, Roehampton Institute of Higher Education, Digby Stuart College, Roehampton Hill, London SW15 5PH. The dates that you should keep free in your 1996 diary are Monday 1 April to Wednesday 3 April, and further details can be obtained either from Dr Edwards or the BAHS Secretary.

CALL FOR CONFERENCE PAPERS

The society is always glad to hear from those willing to offer papers at conferences. If you have a paper to offer you can contact either one of the conference organizers, or the BAHS Secretary who acts as an overall conference coordinator. You should supply a title for your paper and some details, preferably in the form of a short synopsis, together with an indication of which conference(s) you will be available to deliver it. The addresses of the organizers of the forthcoming conference are given above, with the exception of Dr Hoyle who should be contacted at his home address, 37 Lower Bank Road, Fulwood, Preston PR2 4NS. The BAHS Secretary is Dr Richard Perren who can be contacted at the Department of History and Economic History, Taylor Building, University of Aberdeen, Old Aberdeen AB9 2UB, Fax 0224 272300.

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