

Archives départementales de Seine-et-Marne

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MOBILIZATION AND AGRICULTURE IN THE SEINE-ET-MARNE

In early August 1914, when war was declared, thousands of farmers and agricultural workers in Seine-et-Marne were among those mobilized.

The agricultural situation in the Seine-et-Marne during the Great War

Mobilization...

On the eve of the Great War, the department of Seine-et-Marne covered an area of 5931 square kilometres with 591 thousand hectares of arable land. Its industry and commerce were booming thanks to its excellent road system. According to the 1911 census, its working population was 43,117 people.

In early August 1914, when war was declared, 14,000 farmers and farm employees were mobilized. Later, other classes lost people to the conscription, bringing the total to 18,434 - or 42.75% of the agricultural workforce.

... and its consequences

The first task required of non-mobilizable men, women and children was the immediate replacement of all the men who had gone to the front. Their dedication and spirit of solidarity helped to mitigate the problem, initially by completing the harvest and the autumn ploughing. However, the absence of agricultural machinery, requisitioned along with fuel and horses, made the loss of labour even more acute.

Where are all the workers ?



""The invasion of the modern barbarians 1914-1915", a postcard representing groups of German PoWs, taken in Souchez and at the Labyrinth (Department of Pas-de-Calais) in front of a Seine-et-Marne farm in 1915. (AD77, 2 Fi 17408)

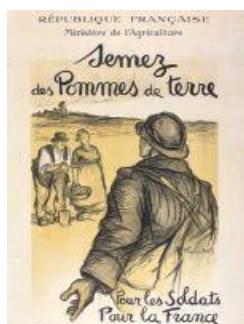
In the autumn, while the men were still at the front and the Battle of the Marne was in full swing in the northern

department, the following groups were needed :

- Women: from August 1914, the President of Viviani Council made an appeal to them. Some mayors organized nurseries to enable them to work and in 1915 teachers were also asked to keep children in school, after school hours and during holidays ;
- Children: they are rarely mentioned, but from age 13 they had to finish their schooling and often help with farm work. Also, although against the law, on 27 July, 1916, the Department of Employment authorised and even encouraged the recruitment of students for farm work during the school holidays ;
- The army: permissions were granted to the heads of farms for periods of eight to fifteen days. In 1916 and early 1917, they became scarce or were abandoned. Then the cities making the requests, were provided with 10,000 soldiers ("special assignees") for periods of 15 days. Finally, in 1916, 520 disabled veterans of the department of Convalescent Homes and the Provins Injured Troops Unit were also made available to vegetable growers for eight days.
- Colonials: in 1916 and 1917, recruitment saw Kabyles and Tunisians brought to the south of Seine-et-Marne and Annamites to the north of the department. The prefecture even created an agricultural service specifically for the many Tunisians ;
- Refugees: many Belgians were driven from their country by the German invasion and settled in the department to take up agricultural jobs. 450 Russians also worked in the fields in April 1919 ;
- German PoWs: despite the Hague Conventions and the mistrust of the women farmers, in 1916 there were 700 of them and they were eventually in great demand (600,000 applications throughout France for 80,000 prisoners in the same year, 1916). For Seine-et-Marne, a first large clearing centre was established in Montargis under the authority of the commander of the Fifth Region followed by a second at Nangis.

A long war

Its consequences



Poster "Sow Potatoes. For our Soldiers. For France", Bernard Taboureau collection, 1917. (AD77, 58 Fi 27)

Seine-et-Marne newspapers published at the time (L'Abeille de Fontainebleau, La Croix de Seine-et-Marne) show that mobilized farmers often feared the massive influx of workers whom they could not control - because they were at the front, because they were no longer masters of their own farms, or because they feared for the safety of their wives. The women were not used to seeing foreign workers in their fields. Thus, each group of foreign workers or PoWs was supervised by a military guard.

The department was also torn between the need to provide subsistence to the army bases, the troops in its territory, troops on the front and to the civilians and refugees that were flooding into the area. The women, when they could get to their land, were more often than not content to maintain family production but were significantly disadvantaged by taxes on wheat, grain, livestock and sugar. Also, the battles and the billeting of armies destroyed crops or damaged the land. The deployment of ammunition depots in the middle of villages and fields also caused land to be requisitioned.

In figures

At the end of the war, farmers and agricultural labourers in Seine-et-Marne paid a heavy price. In December 1919, the Departmental Directorate of Agricultural Services sent the prefect and investigation with an attached statistical report. It revealed that 6,985 farmers, 34% of the mobilized total, had been killed or had left. In addition, there were 643 disabled veterans with limited work capacity. Finally, the collapse in male workers aged 30 to 60 was not offset by the growth in female workers, which led to a severe labour shortage.

Referenced documents

Document shelf marks enable the documents to be viewed in the reading room of the Seine-et-Marne Departmental Archives.

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- Chantal Antier-Renaud, La Grande Guerre en Seine-et-Marne, 1914-1918, Hommes et femmes au cœur de la tourmente, Presse du Village, 1998, 199 p. Shelf mark : 8°5388
- Aide à l'agriculture : états numériques des hommes détachés à la terre, états des demandes faites par les agriculteurs. Shelf marks : 10R105 à 10R107
- D. Dautresme, Les conséquences de la guerre en Seine-et-Marne, étude historique, administrative et économique : rapport du Conseil Général, 1919. Shelf mark : 8R274
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