

Rural Society

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Summary

The paper describes the impact of war on peasantry and its mobilisation in the war effort. While observers portrayed the countryside as rich and callous towards urban shortages or waging war, the conflict accelerated social transformations in rural communities, imposed a great effort on women, and reinforced peasants' social position on the home front. This paper underlines the effects of state intervention in the rural areas and its limits, the reactions to war strains within rural communities in 1917 and the different outcomes of the peasants' war experiences.

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Landscapes and Rural Communities

It could be said that the First World War was a peasants' war; in fact, this social group still represented the majority in almost every belligerent nation and was massively mobilised both in the armies and on the home fronts. The experience of war was central to peasant culture, forming a mainstay of individual and collective memory. War and mobilisation dramatically affected the countryside, which was composed of a very differentiated reality.

Although the industrialisation processes had been underway for decades, up until 1914 the economic landscape in Europe and overseas remained primarily agrarian. However, there were different types of rural communities, which, far from being unified, were characterised by huge spatial, economic and social contrasts, farming techniques, labour and market conditions as well as class differentiation. For instance, in western and central Europe, there were small- and medium-sized family farms based on wheat, grain and dairy farming. Meanwhile in the eastern and southern parts of the continent, there were large estates or rent landlordism.

In this general picture, subsistence farming flanked a fully agrarian capitalist economy integrated with industries; in [Latin America](#) and in southeast Asia, on the other hand, monocultures and plantations prevailed, with exploitive relationships and rudimentary farming methods that exposed peasants to the risks of famine. On the whole, agriculture was largely non-mechanised and relied to a great extent on hand labour. The different agrarian structures also resulted in a huge variety of “peasants” with varying social statuses and economic wealth, different relationships with the land, various working patterns, different levels of literacy and political participation. Peasant living conditions in Europe were particularly varied: there were well-off medium-sized farmers, sharecroppers, and smallholders in [Germany](#) and [France](#), but there was also a great mass of farmhands and landless labourers ([Italy](#), Prussia, [Spain](#), [Russia](#), Hungary) working under very poor conditions. Their working arrangements varied from seasonal hire to semi-feudal relationships based on paternalism and rigid controls.¹

The rural population was still deeply traditional, with an internal patriarchal hierarchy, conservative and [religious](#). Although peasants relied on communal horizons, the advent of industrialisation and the state-nation modernised the countryside (with military service, public education and communication, according to Eugene Weber), linked rural populations to the industrial economy, provided an increasing unionisation and labour militancy, and made peasantry aware of the differences between [urban](#) and rural ways of life through migration. On the eve of 1914, wages, sums deposited in saving banks, participation in rural cooperatives and parties, literacy and decreasing infant mortality testified to a general social and economic growth among the peasantry, even in the most backward areas.² At the same time, in public discourse the countryside was still a source of power for the ruling classes, represented as an imagined place, unchanged and untouched by urban modernity. Peasantry was considered the embodiment of the nation, with its “otherness”, its simple life, frugality, strong ties to institutions and [church](#), and the persistence of village and kin-based social networks.³ World War I influenced this social landscape and shaped it to the core.

Peasants and the Great War in Historiography

When war broke out, industrial [warfare](#) was the main preoccupation for state and military authorities. Although supplying food to the army and the home front was crucial for maintaining [morale](#), agriculture became a sort of “stepchild” of the war effort. However, as historian Avner Offner has underlined, the First World War was also a war of “bread and potatoes”. Agrarian resources – food, grains, livestock, and [raw materials](#), as well as manpower – assumed an increasing importance and dominated policy throughout the war.⁴ Despite the relevance of the rural effort, [historiography](#) has mostly emphasised the war’s industrial character and urban mobilisation.

Rural society was first examined during the 1920s and 1930s in the detailed studies edited by the Carnegie Foundation. These focused mainly on agricultural output, international trading and the economic and demographic impact of the war on the countryside.⁵ In the following decades, rural societies did not receive the attention they deserved. In fact, apart from the regions directly involved in military operations, they were embedded in the general framework of the home front-“*arrière*”. They were considered peripheral or were even neglected. From the late 1970s, historians began studying the peasantry as a part of wartime society, examining the public spirit, the organisation and structures of agrarian economy, food policies, developments in farming and trade unionism.

Following the intuitions of [George Mosse \(1918-1999\)](#), [Eugene Weber \(1925-2007\)](#) and [Edward Thompson \(1924-1993\)](#), historians analysed the relationship between peasants and the state, peasants’ mentality, local loyalties, cultural and political organisations and their different degree of integration into the “body of the nation”.⁶ Research focused on wartime social unrest through the lens of the concept of “moral economy” and gender issues.⁷ In order to evaluate the impact of war on livelihood and to overcome the scarcity of sources generated by rural communities, scholars have extended the range of analysed sources and have underlined the importance of exploring rural regions through the whole decade of the war as a sort of “continuum” of transformation led by war and [revolutions](#).⁸

In the last decade, cultural historians have focused on experiences, representations and discourses that shaped identities and attitudes in the countryside. In this perspective, following the work of historians [Jay Winter](#) and [Antoine Prost](#), who suggested the “different coloration”⁹ of peasant mobilisations if compared to those in urban settings, scholars have emphasised the importance of local and regional case studies. This approach makes it possible to test general issues (i.e. responses to mobilisation, morale, memory, the

relationships between urban and rural areas) through the prism of a particular region or place and thus evaluate the importance of specifically “local factors”.¹⁰

This essay will focus on the wartime mobilisation of the countryside, showing the role played by peasants as a social group in the war effort, the problems and the limits of state intervention in rural areas, the reactions to the war strains within rural communities and the different outcomes of peasants’ war experiences.

Mobilizing the Peasantry

Generally less integrated into the state-nation than the urban population, the rural world was reluctant to go to war. The peasantry remained a largely silent majority; in 1914 in France, Russia, Germany, and later in Italy, peasants reacted to the outbreak of war with fear, consternation, grief and sometimes hostility. Peasants were concerned with the harvest and their holdings.¹¹ Far from the “August spirit”, the peasantry accepted the military service with resignation and fatalism, exhibiting traditional obedience to the authorities rather than zeal and patriotism. For many peasants, war was a sort of “natural calamity”, a waste, a state interference in their business. A parochial worldview prevailed among many Russian and Italian peasants; they identified the “Fatherland” with their “home, family, crops, their village community”. The [aims of war](#) were mostly incomprehensible and thus peasants perceived themselves more as victims than as protagonists.¹²

In other nations, such as [Great Britain](#) and [Australia](#), there was an initial rush to the colours in rural areas. This was driven by local patriotism, economic motivations, community pressure (i.e. fear of being considered a “shirker”) or hierarchical relations, based on paternalism, manorial loyalties and obligations.¹³ After the initial hesitation during the military mobilisation, the mood changed and rural communities showed their resolve and their involvement in the war effort. Peasantry was mobilised with explicit appeals, as occurred in France, where Council President [René Viviani \(1863-1925\)](#) began calling upon women and youth to get involved in agriculture in August 1914.

During wartime, villages became a sort of laboratory for local elites to increase production or change agricultural patterns. Mayors, rural associations, [zemstvos](#), schoolteachers and parish priests played an important role in mobilising peasantry to accept state decisions and preserve the “[union sacrée](#)”. These groups sought social truce and tried to build up a “moral” pact based on the concepts of sacrifice, duty, cooperation and collective responsibility. On the local level, “self-mobilisation” was based on exploiting the communal network of sociability within villages. Landowners, dairies, saving banks, trade unions, cooperatives, and

rural associations promoted national loans or organised patriotic conferences. In 1916-1917, as occurred in France and in Italy, rural chambers stimulated agricultural output with sweepstakes and incentives. Meanwhile, technical newspapers and state officials explained the necessity of modernising agriculture to meet the needs of the war effort, from crop cultivation to farm management. Regional case studies have underlined that these processes, although not homogeneous and with different degrees of active participation, contributed on the whole to “nationalise” the countryside and broke off the peasants’ supposed “insularity”.¹⁴ In fact, peasants, village by village, developed forms of “local patriotism”, supported public charity and expressed their solidarity by preparing bread and packages for “their” soldiers on the frontline.

In all belligerent nations, [propaganda](#) exalted the peasants’ role and celebrated their patriotism and resolution. In France and Italy, for example, national resistance against “industrialised” Germany was based on the image of the peasant-soldier and peasantry as a whole, perceived as the bulk of the nation, with specific moral values, namely sobriety, confidence and endurance. In Great Britain, the rural landscape – “the South Country” – became an icon, a symbol of “Englishness”, to preserve which war was declared.¹⁵

The involvement of women as a rural workforce became a common feature in the belligerent countries. In France and Italy, peasant women were awarded silver medals and “diplomas of honour” by mayors and agrarian associations, publicly recognising their cooperation. Propaganda constructed an idealised image of peasant women: they were the “heroines of the fields”, the bedrock of national agricultural production. They became a model of patriotism and self-sacrifice. However, the new wartime roles were considered temporary and exceptional in order to avoid women’s [masculinisation](#). Women were often represented in a traditional and paternalistic framework, as soldiers’ wives, mothers and, moreover, as preservers of domestic morale.¹⁶

Wartime Agriculture

Rural communities were hard-hit by wartime national mobilisation. From 1914 onwards, war disarrayed international trade, led to labour shortages, increased the movement of populations and reduced agricultural production. Military conscription produced a huge negative shock to the labour market in the European countryside. Almost every peasant household was deprived of its male workforce and the rural society was feminised. The situation seemed to be similar everywhere, with the exception of Great Britain. In Italy, of the 4.8 million men aged over eighteen years employed in agriculture, 2.6 million were called to arms; in Russia, about twelve of the nearly 16 million males called into the army between

1914-1919 were peasants; France mobilised about 4 million peasants during the war, 43 percent of the whole army; in Germany it was about 30 percent.¹⁷

The lack of labourers in the countryside was accentuated by the urbanisation of peasant women, youth and craftsmen towards war industries, as occurred in Italy, France, the Central Powers, but also in [Canada](#) and the [United States](#). In the United States, from 1916 onwards, the end of European immigration and the deterioration of social conditions in the Rural South triggered the “great migration” of peasant and unskilled Afro-American people towards Chicago, New York, Detroit, and Pittsburgh, where war supply industries were developing.¹⁸ In other cases, such as in Germany, the labour shortages were augmented by the sudden closure of national borders, which stopped traditional seasonal migration of Polish and Dutch labourers. The governments tried to compensate for the lack of rural labourers by increasing employment of [prisoners of war](#) and [refugees](#) (for example in Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary) or taking advantage of migration or hired foreign labour from colonies or other states (France). But in general, these measures were limited, as governments relied on the ability of families to adapt to the new situation or later conceded regular leave to soldiers for seasonal work.

As the balance of production and consumption was altered by the military mobilisation and by the need to supply urban areas, governments intervened in different times in the agricultural sector and introduced consumption-oriented food policies. These were more invasive especially among Central Powers who were suffering from the Allied blockade. State authorities imposed price and market controls, delivery quotas or forced requisitions, regulated transportation, distribution and final consumption, thus subordinating the countryside to the demands of urban areas.

As war continued, European agriculture experienced a general output decline and an impoverishment of livestock, due to the reduction of cultivated land, military requisitions and a lack of machinery and fertilizers such as [nitrates](#) and phosphates. On the whole, production stagnated in [neutral](#) European and overseas countries. Meanwhile in Asia, unaffected by the war, production continued to rise as in pre-war years. In the belligerent counties, in particular, the land became less and less productive. Economic historians have shown how 1916-1917 was a turning point almost everywhere in the declining agricultural output, especially in the Central Powers and in Tsarist Russia, where the production of cereals fell by 20 percent by 1916.¹⁹ While the Allies were able to integrate production with imports from overseas, the population of the Central Powers, due to the blockade, suffered from increasing shortages and even hunger. In the Habsburg Empire production fell sharply; by 1917, yields declined to between 40 and 80 percent of pre-war levels. Meanwhile in the [Ottoman Empire](#),

wheat production declined by nearly 30 percent and shortages reached a catastrophic dimension in Lebanon and Syria, where the population experienced famine.²⁰ From the so-called 1916-1917 "turnip winter" (*Kohlrübenwinter*), when bread and potatoes were largely replaced with turnips, German urban dwellers were compelled to go to the countryside in search of food supplies and, in addition, as the case studies of Freiburg, Berlin, Vienna and other cities suggest, they tried to "re-ruralise" urban spaces with "war gardens" by cultivating allotments and keeping small livestock in their homes. In Freiburg, for example, over a third of the households farmed their own plot or had vegetable gardens.²¹

Farming Overseas and in the Neutral Countries

The impact of the war was not limited to the rural populations of the belligerent nations, but had a global influence. Since its outbreak, the war – with the restriction of credit and paralysis of shipping and trading – created a great upheaval of international and inter-European channels of agricultural trade. It increased the vulnerability of states, especially those such as Great Britain and Germany that relied on large-scale importation of foodstuff. The imposition of the Allied blockade and the declining output of European agriculture pushed belligerent states to purchase growing amounts of cereal and food overseas, especially from the United States, the British Dominions (Canada, Australia), Argentina and from neutral countries such as the Netherlands and [Switzerland](#).

Overseas agricultures rapidly grew, stimulated by the high wartime demand, favourable prices and British commandeering, which guaranteed substantial purchase of primary exports (grain, wheat, livestock and dairy products). The soaring prices of wheat pushed Midwest and Canadian farmers to borrow money from the Federal credit system in order to buy more acres and new machinery, especially tractors and silos, which became a way to conserve feed.

As in a "new frontier", farmers considerably extended the arable lands devoted to exportation; in United States the acres of wheat harvested increased from fifty to 75.7 million between 1913 and 1919 and reached the most arid regions of the Great Plains. In the same period, crop acreage increased by 57 percent (35 million acres in 1913, 42 million in 1917, 51 million in 1918, 53 million in 1919) in the so-called Canadian "Prairie" wheat economy (Manitoba, Alberta, Ontario; Saskatchewan). Moreover, cheese and pork exports reached high levels. The favourable growing conditions in 1914-15, combined with the prices of wheat (three times higher than in the pre-war years), allowed the wheat acreage to increase by 73 percent, from 9.3 million acres in 1914 to 16.1 acres in 1918. In Saskatchewan alone, 23,079 new farms appeared between 1911 and 1921. The average farm size grew from 297 to 368

acres.²²

Both in the US and in Canada, this process implied a slight alienation of the Indian land through the promotion of “greater production farms” in the reserves and a permanent erosion of their lands in favour of post-war soldier settlement.²³ In Australia as well, the area planted for wheat increased from 1.2 to 5 million hectares in response to the war effort in 1915-1916.

The war-induced economic and social change was differentiated, depending on the type of exports and the productive relations associated with it. In fact, wartime demand was selective; it reinforced specialisations and the commercialisation of particular crops or products. For instance, Manitoba, Quebec and New Zealand produced essentially wheat, grain, dairy farming, while Argentina and Uruguay exported mainly livestock and frozen meat. While these latter goods were generally heavily demanded, the Brazilian [rubber](#) and [coffee](#) (Sao Paulo, Amazon) and Cuban tobacco were not required. As a result, local rural people either had to differentiate production (processed meat, rice, beans, potatoes, sugar) or increase the acreage devoted to cotton, as occurred in Peru (an increase of 75 percent).²⁴

Recent research has demonstrated that farmers faced great difficulties, and international trade posed some limits on their profits. The growing shortage of shipping penalised the more distant Pacific dominions of Australasia, as the “Atlantic orientation” of Great Britain stimulated increasing purchases of foodstuff from Northern and Southern American markets. In addition, as the war dragged on, producers’ profits were diminished by the imposition of Allied “black lists”, by the establishment of centralised contract buying, by the scarcity of shipping and the rise of freight rates (“war clauses” for risks). Broadly speaking, the exporting boom soon reached its limits. In fact, after the first phase of great output, despite the farmers’ effort, a combination of poor farming practices, locusts, drought, frost and soil exhaustion caused a steady decline in production in both North and South America, as occurred in Argentina in 1914 and 1917 and in Canada between 1917-1919.

Moreover, in order to increase profits, farmers stopped rotating crops and sowed only the most needed and profitable crops. As a result, the land was increasingly impoverished; in Canada, for instance, average crop yields were less than half their pre-war levels by 1918. In general, the high prices favoured great estates and livestock producers, while peasants and rural labourers did not participate in the exporting boom and often had to face with hardships, low wages and unemployment due to the wheat and maize crop failures. At the same time, the high demand of low-quality frozen meat and the drought that reduced fodder contributed to the disruption of the herds. Most profits were made by packers rather than

cattlemen.²⁵

These difficult conditions were also experienced in the colonies, which suffered from a huge drainage of agricultural resources and manpower. Some regions of [British India](#), such as Punjab, became one of the world's great wheat markets. Early in 1915, the British government brought the wheat purchase under its control and shipped more than 3 million tons to the Allies, together with 170,000 animals for military equipment, rice, flour, sugar, tea, oil seeds (2.5 million tons) and another 5 million of tons of various foodstuff. The war effort, despite the prosperity of tea, jute and cotton plantations, augmented the internal imbalances, as the prevailing export production led a decrease in food production. Impoverished peasants were victims of many epidemics, such as cholera, malaria and [influenza](#), which had an extraordinary death toll (tens of millions, with 1 million in Punjab alone) in 1918.²⁶

Overall, the new economic opportunities and agricultural export in the colonies favoured the ruling classes – colonisers and white settlers – as occurred in Kenya and South Africa. Moreover, in rural India and in the French colonies ([West Africa](#), [Indochina](#)) the numerous cases of forced recruitment increased the “militarisation” of society and led to episodes of violent resistance. By 1917 the rising prices, hardships and social dislocation made food riots endemic.²⁷

Nonetheless, the war opened new channels of trade that had not been competitive in the pre-war period. This was the case of the European neutral countries – such as Spain, Switzerland, [Denmark](#), [Norway](#), [Sweden](#) and the Netherlands – which were favoured from 1914 to 1917 (the period in which the Allied embargo extended against the Central Powers), as they were free to export agricultural products to both warring sides. Although Great Britain tried to control their imports and stipulated agreements to purchase their goods (Denmark and Switzerland in 1915; the Netherlands in 1916), Danish and Dutch farmers preferred to sell their surplus grains, processed foodstuff, horticulture, meat and livestock to Germany or resorted to the black market and smugglers due to the higher prices. New agreements with Great Britain (July-November 1916), and, above all, the strengthening of the blockade reduced their foodstuff and determined a reorientation of the cereal production to increase home consumption.²⁸

Villages at War: Between Change and Continuity

In a short period, war brought profound transformation to rural communities and modified labour and gender relations. Everyday life in the villages was feminised and women gained a

new visibility in private and public spheres as they became a significant part of the rural labour-force and had to assume the role of head of the household. In France, women ran about one-third of farms, and in 1916 in Bavaria alone, around 44 percent.²⁹ Far from being passive subjects, peasant women and girls had to do all the “male” jobs. In addition, they directly managed state allowances, acted collectively, and frequented the marketplaces and town halls, thus establishing new relationships with local officials. In particular, young women in Russia and Italy acquired new skills and a higher level of literacy. In this way, they began to develop a sense of dignity and felt entitled to new rights since they participated in the war effort or because their men were at the battlefield.³⁰

These new roles seemed to destabilise the traditional hierarchies based on patriarchy and male dominance. The departure of men to the battlefield was a source of great dismay for women; they were alone and subject to intense physical strain due to the heavy labour required in farming and housekeeping. Wartime correspondence and diaries demonstrate that women faced their new responsibilities with courage; when they did not feel skilled enough, they requested help from their husbands at the front. [Letters](#) also became an important tie between the home front and frontline. Peasant-soldiers remained closely connected with their farms; they were worried about the fate of their holdings and thus gave their wives instructions on how to carry out the necessary work. They also at times attempted to obtain leave.³¹

Notwithstanding the labour shortages, in the first phase of the war, family farms contributed to stabilise rural society. From an economic point of view, rural communities benefited from the sharp rise in grain prices and the restriction of farm expenditures, earned money from state agencies’ purchases of foodstuff, horses and fodder and were able to vary crops following market demand. Due to the military requisitions, however, dairy production suffered badly. Since the first wartime harvest of August 1914 in rural villages, self-organisation, goodwill, and neighbourhood ties prevailed. Families intensified their efforts and churches provided new nurseries for children to help mothers farm. The loss of able-bodied men was offset by the increasing use of women or by the networks of formal and informal cooperation within rural communities, with mutual exchanges of labour and draught animals during seasonal work. Overall, incomes and commodities facilitated the adoption of new agricultural methods, allowed medium- and large-scale farmers to buy machinery, and work – such as in France or in [New Zealand](#) dairy production – was ameliorated despite the loss of manpower.

However, in the backward agricultures, such as in tsarist Russia or southern Italy, the areas cultivated with wheat and rye were reduced in the districts hard-hit by military conscription and much land was abandoned or devoted to pasture.³² The

increasing income of rural families was also due to the overwork of all family members, from the youngest to the eldest. Indeed, private transactions of foodstuff and state subsidies helped stabilise or even improve living standards, thus allowing the peasants to save money, purchase goods (clothing, shoes, sugar, perfumes, even new land) and to obtain war loans. The circulation of unprecedented sums of money was severely criticised by parish priests as a lack of sobriety. Indeed, despite the moralistic tones, these accusations were part of a wider public discourse aimed at defending urban consumers and restoring hierarchies.

War also rearranged the social composition in the countryside: due to the military conscription, villages were increasingly composed of women, the elderly and [children](#), but also soldiers, foreign prisoners, [enemy aliens](#) and refugees. This social upheaval, the moral sufferings and the temporary collapse of patriarchal authority favoured the transformation of mental and social morals, especially along the French and [Italian front](#), where the large presence of soldiers broke up the rules of peasant communities and relaxed social controls and gender relations. Due to the absence of men, young girls experimented with new relationships, while married women, in search of protection and better conditions, had sexual intercourse with soldiers. For instance, in Friuli and Veneto, northern Italian border regions near the front, hundreds of illegitimate babies were born due to clandestine [prostitution](#), extramarital relationships ("union libre") or [rape](#). This behaviour was condemned as "moral decay" by priests who were worried about the weakening of church authority among peasant people. However, these social changes were more the result of wartime pressure rather than a [real female emancipation](#).³³ Nonetheless newspapers and public discourse emphasised the images of social and moral disorder in the countryside where families seemed to disintegrate under the burden of war.

In France, Germany and Italy one of the common features of this disorder was the image of the unruly "abandoned youth", idle and vicious, out of parental control. In the rear areas of the frontline, peasant youth were blamed for the ease of making an income, as well as for the freedom in spending that income drinking and smoking or for stealing. Priests and the middle class advocated more controls. These representations reflected not only the challenges that youth and female participation in the labour market posed to gender hierarchies, but also the fears of the middle class towards the increasing importance of peasants and workers in the new wartime society. Indeed, through wartime employment youths experienced a great autonomy, gained a certain economic independence, helped their families, and demonstrated responsibility. But at the same time they migrated, trying to escape from the countryside, where the work was heavy and poorly paid. They suffered from harsh subordination under adults. From this point of view, youth augmented the links between rural and urban settings and introduced generational tensions in the villages.³⁴

On the other hand, wartime suffering stimulated an increasing search for stability and attachment to older forms of devotion and popular piety, so that communions increased and peasants participated in pilgrimages and processions. In particular, women transformed traditional celebrations into a sort of prayer for peace, or followed superstitious beliefs and practices as a means of individual and collective protection. The religious interpretations of the war, often based on the idea of “divine” punishment and self-sacrifice, helped spread endurance and resignation. According to south Bavarian women, peace could be delivered only by divine Providence, but these expectations and attitudes, which favoured the persistence of the Church’s moral authority on village life, were progressively eroded by the duration of the war.³⁵

War Comes to the Fields

The prolongation of the war put the peasantry’s endurance to the test. By late 1916, national mobilisations showed an increasing peasant resistance and a widespread war-weariness. As in urban settings, these limitations – which had different manifestations and outcomes – depended on the different degree of the peasantry’s integration into the nation-state and on the notion of the “equality of sacrifices”, that is, the expectation that the war sacrifices would be equally shared among all members of society. From this perspective, the war strains were expressed by peasantry along class lines, but also in the conflict between country and town. In fact, from 1916 onwards, as agricultural prices soared and shortages in the cities became a common feature, the tensions between the producers and consumers gained a central dimension of social conflict in almost every belligerent nation.

This sort of cultural struggle was based on mutual suspicion of lack of patriotism. Merchants and farmers – as occurred in Paris, Vienna and Berlin – were accused of profiteering and depicted as “greedy speculators”, “black marketeers” and “rural hoarders”.³⁶ This conflict had its roots, especially in Germany, in the mutual pre-war perceptions that urban and rural dwellers had of each other, namely in the increasing awareness of the different patterns of “civilisation”.³⁷

Alongside the rural-urban strains, the winter of 1916-1917 marked a sharp deterioration of living conditions in the countryside as well, so that anxieties about agricultural production and even fears of famine grew. Rural communities suffered from reduced production and trade, inadequate subsidies for families left without breadwinners, lack of basic consumer goods, increasing tax burden and inadequate medical care. The worsening conditions undermined peasants’ morale and generated uneasiness among peasant-soldiers on the front as well.³⁸ The difficulties on the home front, in particular the labour shortages and increasing

state regulations over agrarian economy, augmented divisions and social inequalities and progressively detached rural populations from the war effort. The main cause of discontent was the lack of labourers and the mounting casualties. In fact, if the first drafts were accepted with resignation, the following conscriptions represented a sort of “material and moral blow” to the villages.³⁹

As war prolonged, the idea spread among peasantry of the unfairness of the burden of mobilisation, since the urban working class and upper classes were exempted from military conscription, thanks to bribes and abuses of medical commissions. In 1916-1917 this [social conflict](#) was evident not only in Russia, but also on the Allied side, where the contradiction between the request for [food](#) supplies and the increasing conscription of the rural workforce emerged. The “fight or farm” dilemma was particularly harsh especially in Canada and Australia, where farmers’ associations defended the voluntary system of conscription and asked for exemptions. In Australia, compulsory conscription was defeated two times (October 1916; December 1917); meanwhile, Canadian rural associations’ protests temporarily obtained exemption tribunals.⁴⁰ The refusal of conscription was also widespread in Italy, where [military tribunals](#) put almost 470,000 draft-dodgers (mainly rural soldiers) on trial, or in the rural south of the United States, where about 95,000 (up to 600,000) farmers and peasants (rural whites, especially the poorest people, and blacks) resisted conscription.⁴¹

The state mobilisation also exacerbated differences among the peasantry and widened inequalities. For instance, the conscription and requisition of draught animals had a different impact on large estates as opposed to smaller holdings. Moreover, the different social connections among rural elites favoured large estates in the use of war prisoners’ labour. At the same time, the evasion of state regulations (grain levies, fixed prices, military exemptions) and the discretionary distribution of state allowances within the villages increased the discontent against local authorities and progressively undermined morale.

In addition, war also accentuated economic differentiation among peasants. In fact, wartime inflation, the freezing on contract rent, and state incentives widened the rift between the well-off medium-sized farmers and rural labourers. The latter, who relied on monetary wages, often experienced the same problems of urban dwellers as they suffered a steep decline in purchasing power due to inflation and the increasing prices of daily necessities and manufactured goods.⁴² The August 1914 mutual solidarity was shaken by strains and hampered by repeated military drafts.

Fatigue worsened relationships within the rural world; as judicial sources reveal, everyday life was often characterised by quarrels that sometimes crossed the boundaries between smaller

and larger farmers and erupted in acts of violence. In the wintertime there was a sharp rise in theft (wood, vegetables, poultry), which eroded community ties; a large part of these incidents involved women, most of them mothers, as well as the poor and the elderly.⁴³ In addition, the intensity of women's work led to a sharp increase in accidents and diseases, although the level of mortality was lower than in urban population because peasants, in general, had direct access to food.

As in urban areas, the peasantry was also pervaded by rumours: in 1917, the idea that war was pursued only to decimate the rural population and save allowances and foodstuff spread in the European countryside; in addition, police and authority reports show how the desire for peace increased apocalyptic and millenialist visions, such as the well-known case of Fátima (Portugal, May-October 1917), or the numerous cases of Italian peasant girls who claimed to have seen natural signs, saints or the crying Holy Mother who prophesied the end of the war.⁴⁴

Peasants' Unrest

By 1917, the endless war and the sacrifices of the mobilisation accelerated the popular desire for peace and fuelled peasants' unrest. The protests in the countryside acquired an increasing political force and contributed to disrupt peasants' subordination. The demonstrations, which occurred particularly in tsarist Russia and Italy, nations hard-hit by war strains, reached their peak in the spring and summer of 1917. Scholars had emphasised the importance of age and gender in the rural protest. In fact, women first felt the war weariness and therefore were protagonists of riots characterised by a longing for social justice and equality of entitlement.⁴⁵ They felt their families threatened by deteriorating conditions and soldiers' wives (*Soldatki*) claimed the "right of subsistence", thus struggling with local state officials or writing letters and petitions to obtain some relief.⁴⁶ These spontaneous demonstrations, which often occurred while women were queuing outside the town halls to obtain state allowances, also made the "ambivalence" of the state subsidies emerge. This created feelings of guilt and fuelled women's protests – they considered this aid unacceptable. Not only was it too little, but benefits represented the prolongation of war itself.

As a result, women expressed their desire for peace, demanded the return of men from the front, and protested against requisitioning and rising prices. In Italy, in particular, even though women did not have the support of the Socialist Party, their demonstrations assumed an anti-war character; they activated individual and collective rebellions, invaded city halls, raised barricades, helped deserters, and showed a growing hate against the symbols of

authorities (propertied elites, priests, propagandists) and a deepening social antagonism.⁴⁷

The different ways in which peasants demonstrated their discontent, from “moral protest” to violent riots against propertied elites, depended above all on the erosion of traditional authority and on the peasants’ distrust of state agencies that were considered responsible for prolonging the war and popular suffering.⁴⁸ In the summer of 1917, peasants from France to Russia refused to purchase war loans, following the suggestions of soldiers at the front. They thought that if they had stopped producing grain (*grève du blé* or grain strike), the war would have come to an end. Farming went from a patriotic virtue to a sort of “betrayal” that only extended the war.⁴⁹

Case studies show that the unrest started in the “industrialised” countryside – where peasants depended on markets and had the opportunity to hear news and rumours that favoured political issues – and then involved industrial workers, as women came to town to protest. Unlike other nations, in Italy, since the new working class had strong ties with the countryside, there was a strong solidarity between workers and peasants. Furthermore, the strains reinforced grievances and made “land hunger” emerge throughout Europe. In the wake of the war, the poorest peasants began to challenge the landed elites and sought a change from poverty. In Italy, from 1916 onwards the rural labourers in the southern regions (Sicily, Calabria, Lazio), but also in some French departments such as l’Allier, occupied uncultivated lands. In this general picture, the 1917 Russian example constituted a cornerstone for worldwide peasantry.

Agricultural Remobilisations 1917-1918

In the last part of the war, the increasing discontent and the problem of providing the population and the army with food and supplies assumed central importance. The threat of a breakdown of food supplies forced governments to improve the declining agricultural output, compensate shortages in the workforce and remobilise peasants to achieve the final victory. As soon as the food production became crucial, the farmers, the land issue and the role of the peasant-citizen-soldier assumed increasing relevance in propaganda. In 1917-1918, states intensified economic governance and created agricultural committees in each rural municipality in order to organise agricultural work and accelerate the changes in the use and management of farmland. State authorities rewarded peasants, extended agricultural contracts, provided services for farmers, distributed new machinery and seeds, supported agricultural research and sustained rural organisations to improve productivity.

Since German [submarine warfare](#) severely hit the food supplies from overseas, even the British government recognised the strategic importance of agriculture, thus abandoning its

policy of laissez-faire and guaranteeing high prices for cereal crops, ensuring minimum wages for farm workers and material assistance through county committees (1917, Corn Act Production). In addition, the British government decided to take over 2.5 million acres of land for farming and in 1917-1918 the land under production increased from 10 million acres to 12 million (plus 20 percent). This effort was accompanied by the involvement of the new female workforce; in fact, alongside conscientious objectors, the lands were cultivated by 20,000 women who belonged to the civilian organisation called "Women's Land Army", organised by the British Board of Agriculture.

This experience was also repeated in Canada and the United States, where local governments and private organisations recruited women and young men ("Farmerettes", "Soldiers of the Soil") to increase the arable land. These patriotic groups and tractors soon became the new icons of state intervention in the countryside.⁵⁰ In 1917-1918, when the primary concern was providing the Entente Powers with an adequate food supply, the US and Canadian governments implemented price support on crops, mobilised the rural world with propaganda campaigns (such as the well-known slogan "Food will win the war") and gave farmers increasing assistance (machinery, seeds, agricultural supervisors).⁵¹

These processes were neither smooth nor painless; regional case studies (such as Devon, or south Bavaria) have demonstrated that farmers were conservative and reluctant to employ women who were not experienced in agriculture. Moreover, state intervention was considered as an unnecessary interference and often clashed with traditions and customary practices. Its success depended on the different degree of recognition of state legitimacy and on the ability of the state agencies and rural elites to negotiate changes with farmers.

Remobilisation had success in France, where the government conceded more leaves and exemptions to peasant-soldiers, ameliorated agricultural prices and organisations held patriotic meetings in the rural villages. State officials helped farmers to overcome labour shortages or created the "motorculture" services to cultivate abandoned land. After the crisis of summer-autumn 1917, the will to hold on allowed the French peasantry to endure until the final victory.⁵² In Italy, however, given the growing discontent in the countryside, the state effort left society divided. In September 1917, the Italian government conceded peasants' social insurance against injuries, but these measures had little effect on rural unrest. After the [Caporetto](#) defeat, it had to promise "the land to the combatants" as a reward. This policy had partial success but created an atmosphere of expectation, which in the aftermath of war created serious unrest and rural violence.⁵³

Peasants' Secessions: 1917 Russia and the Central Powers

The Revolution in the Russian Countryside

In some belligerent nations, the attempts to mobilise peasantry failed. The wartime effort highlighted contradictions within society and intensified the feelings of injustice and anger towards the upper classes. Unlike in France and, to some extent Germany, where family farms played an important role in stabilising rural society, in Russia – where the war produced a deep economic and social disruption and people experienced severe shortages – the rift between the peasantry and authorities increased. From late 1916, rural villages became a sort of hotbed of resistance.

Scholars have demonstrated that the old regime was not able to integrate the peasantry into the imperial [war aims](#) and that peasants' aspirations clashed with those of the ruling classes. The repressions after the [1905 revolution](#), the lack of land reform, and the peasants' longstanding grievances contributed to internal instability and undermined popular commitment to the war. The home front crisis was accelerated by the huge casualties on the battlefield, the contradictory management of the war effort and relief initiatives that were hampered by state bureaucrats. The backwardness of agricultural production increased the difficulties as state intervention began to reduce rural resources – workforce and draught animals – and brought foodstuff to feed armies and urban areas, while in the countryside there was a sharp reduction of manufactured goods and even foodstuff.

Given this difficult situation, recent regional analysis has underlined that peasants took action above all in defence of their perceived economic interests. In fact, in late 1916 and then in spring 1917 peasants resisted forced requisitions ("*razvyorstka*") at low fixed prices and consumed their food surpluses on their own. The overstrained railway system worsened the situation because trade broke down not only between country and town but also between production and consumption rural areas. In 1916-1917, about 67 percent of the Russian agricultural output remained in the countryside and production areas tended to disintegrate into self-sufficient regions. The increasing shortages (and the fear of shortages) radicalised the peasantry, destabilised local administrators and gave way to centrifugal forces based on ethnic, political and cultural self-determination. Meanwhile, food riots in urban areas escalated and contributed to the collapse of the tsarist regime in February 1917.^{[54](#)}

On the other hand, scholars have underlined that wartime pulled the peasantry into a "national" political framework, and this pushed them to consider themselves as active citizens of the nation and pursue their own interest. Wartime strains made them eager not

only to obtain land and peace but also freedom, equality and political participation. For instance, on the local level, *Soldatki* and peasants experienced new freedom and full citizenship through new forms of democratic institutions in the villages, such as Peasants' Councils, and reinforced national and ethnic issues combined with economic interests. Moreover, the February Revolution did not solve the outstanding problems of food supplies, peace and land. For the [Provisional Government](#), the requirement to continue the war came before social reforms and this polarised society and augmented the Bolshevik agitation among peasants.

Resentment turned rapidly into anger and from spring-summer 1917, peasants also carried out their own revolution. While the army and the internal authority were collapsing, locally, on a large scale, with many "village revolutions", Belarusian, Ukrainian and Volga peasants started to seize lands and properties, channelling their anger against landlords.⁵⁵ The issues of [Vladimir Lenin \(1870-1924\)](#) well-known appeal "Bread, Peace and Land" represented the key factors to the peasants' support of the Bolshevik [revolution](#) in October 1917. The new regime was also recognised because it legalised the seizures and regulated land distribution. However, the imposition of a food and political dictatorship led to a massive and violent [civil war](#) that lasted three years and led to almost 5 million deaths.

State and Cities as Enemies: Central Powers

As in Russia, among the Central Powers, shortages and urban rural strains played a great role in destabilising society. In a framework dominated by increasing shortages and even hunger, the German farmers showed how the war changed social hierarchies and strengthened the peasants' position because they controlled vital sources. This process had its roots in the state intervention in agricultural resources. In fact, by late 1916 the consumption-oriented food policies hampered the farmers' capacity to have a free disposal of agricultural goods and diverted increasing agricultural resources towards cities. The state-fixed prices were so below the market rate that they spread bitterness and did not motivate farmers to sell agricultural goods.

Peasants' discontent was also aggravated by the fact that, despite their overwork in the fields, they received little public recognition and solidarity from urban dwellers, who accused peasants and farmers of enriching themselves through a black market, starving the cities and lacking patriotism. Among peasants, the perception of injustice sharpened as they felt overstretched and poorly paid. Their extra work was not recognised and they felt like "slaves", antagonised and politically discriminated against by state and urban dwellers.⁵⁶ The state attempts at remobilising the peasantry had little effect⁵⁷ and thus, in order to mitigate

increasing shortages in the cities, the government used a punitive approach toward the peasantry, conducting inspections, confiscations and farm-to-farm searches for hidden reserves.

However, despite war weariness and peasant radical discontent, this situation, with the exception of Bavaria, did not lead German and Austrian peasants to revolt. The different labour relations and agrarian structures and their relatively better conditions compared to Russian peasants triggered instead a self-defensive behaviour in order to avoid the invasive presence of the state, perceived as an “enemy”. Thus peasantry became indifferent to or even resentful of the urban population and withdrew from the war effort. In fact, farmers withheld grain stocks from delivery and hoarded it for the black market, sabotaged food agencies with obstructionism, hid cows in the forests, fed their cattle with agricultural surplus, and falsified or under-reported harvest production.

Despite appeals for patriotism and the threat of fines, increasing amounts of foodstuff – especially meat, milk, butter, cheese – were diverted to the black market and sold for about twice or even three times as much the official prices. By 1917-1918, the black market in Germany was something more than a “supplement”; authorities estimated that about one-third of the food supply and about 75 percent of milk produced disappeared onto the black market. If, on one hand, the black market and inflation permitted peasants’ enrichment, on the other hand this phenomenon caused a great disproportion of food availability across the regions, between urban and rural areas, and between different income groups. In [Austria-Hungary](#) the problem of food distribution was accompanied by increasing quarrels between Hungarian and Cislethanian part of the empire. Meanwhile among ethnic minorities, the shortages were soon combined with nationalistic claims. In the long run, alongside military setbacks, inequalities and shortages deteriorated state legitimacy, eroded social cohesion and determined the final disintegration of Central Powers’ home fronts.

War and its Aftermath

It is difficult to draw general remarks, as rural societies are a complex reality and war was experienced and elaborated upon “locally”. Overall, in the trenches and on the home front, peasantry played a crucial role and rural communities were demographically upset. In fact, about half of the total casualties on the battlefronts were peasants. The war effort in the interior was not less dramatic due to anguish, fatigue and disease. The war also produced an intense acceleration that influenced the slow rhythms (“*longue durée*”) of rural societies, causing changes in mentality, customs and, in some cases, agricultural structures. The dynamics of rural society on the home front were largely shaped by state control of the agrarian economy.

In this turmoil, communities were dramatically involved in a national political framework. They adapted, “peasantized” or even resisted the changes the war brought. These patterns of reaction were affected by relational perceptions of the war, state intervention and urban settings, so that state authorities and elites had to negotiate to promote changes required by mobilisation. The “food or fight dilemma” on the Entente Powers’ side, the conflict between peasants, urban dwellers and landlords among the Central Powers and Russia demonstrate the increasing influence of the peasantry. Shortages, or even hunger, were pressing, and farmers acquired social and political force that reversed their position of subordination to urban settings and allowed them to pursue its own agenda (survival, workforce, continuation of business, land, citizenship and peace).

This increasing social force, such as in Russia in 1916-1917 or in the Central Powers in 1917-1918, clashed against state mobilisation. If in the latter cases, the peasants’ withdrawal from the war effort contributed to lead the home fronts to collapse, vice versa the peasants’ support and resolve were crucial for the endurance until final victory, as occurred in France. Although war had different outcomes, European and even overseas agrarian societies were shaken up; the experience of Bolshevik Russia and the “land hunger” had a worldwide significance and introduced a deep political instability in the countryside. In fact, farmhands, landless labourers and poor peasants, exacerbated by the war, were eager to have land reforms and a social radical change. Between 1918 and 1920 there was a sudden rise of peasant movement in every country in Europe, mostly in its eastern and central part. A number of regions experienced rural strikes, riots, even revolutions, reflecting the crisis of agrarian society and the atmosphere of disorder.

The rural discontent and massive upsurge in militancy also involved overseas dominions, especially Canada, [Latin America](#) and colonies, such as in India, China, [Burma](#), Indochina, where peasant unrest engendered home rule movements. Although not internally unified, some of these peasant movements followed revolutionary issues, inspired by the Russian revolution, with the establishment of peasants’ councils (Bavaria, former regions of the Austria-Hungary Empire). Some others, however, had a more parliamentary character, but were united by the common aspiration to put an end to the rural feudalism, fuelled by the desire of land ownership and full citizenship. From this point of view, the outcomes of the war were in some extent contradictory because, although peasants dictated social changes, their mobilisation did not necessarily evolve into emancipatory politics. Political circumstances, dynamics and popular experiences varied widely. In fact, if one considers Central and Eastern Europe, war and revolution – the “continuum of crisis” period from 1914 to 1922 – swept away and “remade” the countryside. The October Revolution broke off the peasant-landlord relationship, redistributed land, and enabled the rural population to install new governing bodies. Differently, the Prussian landed elite survived the challenges posed by war, and in

general, in Germany, Italy, Hungary, Spain, [Portugal](#) and France there were no significant land reforms. Meanwhile, where reforms schemes were introduced ([Poland](#), [Yugoslavia](#), [Bulgaria](#), [Czechoslovakia](#), and [Romania](#)), the redistribution of land was partial and in some cases halted when right-wing governments or dictatorships came to power during the interwar period.⁵⁸

In this general picture, in many cases, land became a sort of reward for military service, due to the fact that state authorities or [ex-servicemen associations](#) instituted boards to help returning veterans obtain uncultivated land and promote agricultural settlements. It is worth remembering that during the war, with the exception of the Russian case, all groups within rural societies had enough to eat, and this represented an important stabilising factor. From this perspective, on the whole, the “traditional sources of stability” within rural society, such as the peasant family, religion and subsistence farming, demonstrated their strength and persistence in this period of crisis, so that continuity outweighed change. However, as the case studies demonstrate, the peasants attitudes were differentiated, reflecting their conditions, working patterns, culture, pre-war relationships and the conservative forces of the Catholic church, which locally moulded and mitigated the impact of the war.⁵⁹

Unlike Russian poor peasants, who turned to revolution, in South Bavaria, Rhine Westphalia and Austria, well-off farmers radicalised but briefly participated in the [1918 revolution](#), mostly to protest against state intervention in agrarian economy. The main issue of their protest was peace at any price and the desire to return to pre-war realities as quickly as possible. The war experience, instead, created a profound break with the past, especially among farmhands and landless labourers who, after the terrible test of the war, wanted a reward for their service and expected a slight improvement of their conditions, as inequalities were real and pressing. They acted collectively; their traditional mentality of submission and deference towards owners and landlords was blown away by a new spirit of independence.

On the other hand, many smallholders and rural labourers, who lived with the landowner, decided to leave the countryside. In fact, the experiences of social mixing with other people with different cultural and professional backgrounds both on the frontline or in urban settings created disillusion on the return to civilian rurality. Therefore, in the aftermath of war many young people migrated towards urban areas in search of a different way of life. From this perspective, war introduced generational tension among peasants and accelerated the processes of urbanisation.

In the areas dominated by large estates (Pomerania, Mecklenburg, Valle Padana, Apulia), farmhands and the poorest sharecroppers (especially in Veneto, Tuscany and Umbria) fought for a more tolerable existence in the countryside. The traditional labour relations and ancient

corvées were considered unbearable and the attempts of rural elites to impose them again sparked anger and a massive class-conflict in 1919-1920. This was accompanied by an increasing politicization of the workers promoted by Catholic and Socialist trade unions.⁶⁰ These struggles brought a slight transformation of labour relations: for instance, in Germany the new servants' law granted agricultural labourers freedom of association and the right to strike; in Great Britain came minimum wage; in Italy, unionized rural labourers and sharecroppers were able to win higher wages, collective bargains, organised employment, the recognition of arbitration committees, and new allocation of farm products.

In some cases, the difference of agreements and conditions among peasants hindered the formation of a united social and political group. In Austria and Germany, despite the social unrest, peasants ended up supporting conservative and nationalist parties during the Weimar Republic,⁶¹ due to the long-lasting urban-rural strains and the little attention paid by Social-Democrats to the rural world. In Hungary, the lack of land redistribution made the [Béla Kun \(1886\)](#) revolutionary government lose peasants' support. Nonetheless, estate landowners tried to resist to peasants' radicalisation in many ways. If, on the one hand, rural elites in Germany and Italy exploited the divisions between peasants, re-organised much of the rural labour force in a way that facilitated the compliance of the estate workers, or used the patriotism unleashed by the war to blur class divisions and build conservative attitudes, on the other hand, landlords "militarised" the countryside and resorted to [paramilitary troops](#) (Fascist Squadrist, *Freikorps*), while revolutionary Russia precipitated the civil war with the Green or White forces.⁶² From an economic point of view, the war was a period of regress, caused by the displacement of technical devices and workforce mobilisation; production fell, farm management was weakened, international trade diminished and favoured overseas agricultures. This consolidated the position of the US and Canadian farmers as exporters. The shift toward specialisation and mechanisation went further because the war increased the size of agricultural markets and their worldwide integration.

Despite the huge losses and sacrifices, farmer-peasants as a social group were on the "winner side" of belligerent societies. During wartime, many peasants, especially medium-sized holders, but also many smallholders, benefited from the war. Meanwhile, due to the shortages in the workforce, the farmhands were able to obtain better agreements and higher wages, albeit still lower than the industrial jobs. Overall, the war experience contributed to a transformation of the land ownership. In fact, in the aftermath of war a new group of farm owners, who benefited from wartime profits, mortgage debt liquidation and the freeze on rents, came into existence. In France, for instance, a national enquiry in 1920 underlined the peasant "enrichment" in about half of the departments and widespread land purchases that made the very small holdings almost disappear. A similar phenomenon occurred in Italy,

where between 1919 and 1927 many tenants and sharecroppers became smallholders, about 1 million hectares were purchased, and also in Great Britain, where by December 1922 about a quarter of the land had changed hands.⁶³ Even among the defeated side, German and Austrian farmers, due to the extent of the inflation in the post-war years, were able to ameliorate their position, improve their holdings with further mechanisation and new commodities. As a consequence, they temporarily broke out of their “civilisational backwardness”.

The war reinforced the social position of farmers and peasants, who abandoned parochial concerns or a local patriotism and acquired a new sense of loyalty to the nation and consolidated the patriotic spirit. This experience made them aware of their place in the nation. This sense of worth and power found expression in an increasing politicization, trade unionism and in a further development of the network of cooperation which moulded the social fabric of the countryside. Nonetheless, the rural world increased in its importance for home food security. In the public discourse, peasants were viewed positively; they were celebrated as producers and as “peasant-soldiers”, instead of what happened in the Second World War, when they were perceived as greedy profiteers.

From this perspective, the conflict marked a turning point in the politics of the countryside and contributed to a new reflection on the role of agriculture within the economy and society. The post-war prosperity, both in Europe and overseas, lasted briefly and during the interwar years, farmers and peasants experienced huge depression. Both democracies and totalitarian states favoured agricultural modernisation and renewed their intervention in stabilising markets, promoting science and technical progress and improving the housing and living standards.

However, war experience had been too traumatic to be completely shoved aside, therefore the need to secure food became a major objective of agriculture policies, such as in Switzerland or fascist Italy. Meanwhile, the problem of rural population pressure gave rise to top-down ruralisation projects, state-organised migrations and attempts to stem the rural exodus.⁶⁴ Interwar ruralism reinforced the dominance of agricultural ethos; dictatorships and conservative governments in most cases identified with the peasant parties and there was, as in Italy or in France, a slight return to agrarianism, ideologically based on the image of the peasant-soldier and the family farm – which became a symbol of stability, moderation and the physical soundness of the “nation in arms”.

At the same time, war and its aftermath accelerated social process almost everywhere; with its experience of mobility, urbanisation and industrialisation, the war contributed to extend the horizons of rural population and augmented the ties with markets and modern methods

of agriculture, which, in the long run, caused the rural world to decline and lose its multifaceted cultural identity. The persistence of the elements of continuity often meant that the ruling class had to adopt massive interventions of stabilisation “from above” to preserve traditional hierarchies. Notwithstanding these efforts, the modernisation processes and massive rural-urban migrations gradually changed European agrarian landscapes and accelerated the disruption of rural societies.

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Notes

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