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# Food and Nutrition (France)

By [Emmanuelle Cronier](#) and [Stéphane Le Bras](#)

**In times of war, food becomes a major concern in military and civilian matters. This contribution aims to discuss the food situation in France and its specificities between 1914 and 1918. It focuses on food supply both for the military and the home front, in order to understand how those issues are connected and entangled. It covers official directives, as well as everyday life and the impact on individuals and collective groups, to demonstrate how food is part of the process of totalization and how the French reacted and adapted on both societal and state levels.**

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## Introduction

In March 1916, the weekly magazine *Lectures pour tous* pointed out one of the major problems French civilians had to face in their daily lives: the continuous and galloping price inflation.<sup>[1]</sup> While the article covered all products or services that had increased since the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, its major focus was on food, as depicted by the main illustration.

These food concerns did not spare the battlefield, quite the contrary. In *Le Feu* (1916), Henri Barbusse (1873-1935) frequently referred to these problems.<sup>[2]</sup> From the description of military cooks to the price of camembert or the techniques to preserve food, the topic was omnipresent in the daily life and discussions of soldiers.

Thus, during the conflict, both on the battle lines and the civilian life, the French had to face many constraints to obtain supplies and to consume them. With different nuances depending on the location and the period, the French had to adapt to new consumption patterns, new restrictive traffic conditions and new habits. This led, in a general context of scarcity, to an unprecedented global supply framework and an adaptation of consumption strategies in uncertain and stressful times.

## Rationalizing the food supply

### Ruling and coordinating the war effort

For the general staff and the military authorities, past experiences showed that the management of food supplies, from the relations with the suppliers to the consumption by the soldiers, was a crucial factor for a victorious campaign.<sup>[3]</sup> The army learned from the Franco-Prussian War, when the siege of Paris in 1870-1871 had been the prelude to the defeat. This was why food-supplying methods were revised in April 1914 by the department of military subsistence, resulting in a reconfiguration and a rationalization of the composition of the rations.<sup>[4]</sup> In the same logic (based on the law of 24 July 1873 which revised the general organization of the army), lists of trade intermediaries, like for instance wine wholesalers in the Hérault,<sup>[5]</sup> were compiled to guarantee the supply of the armies.

After mobilization in August 1914, the lack of horses,<sup>[6]</sup> carts, automobiles, boats, straw or phytosanitary products— in addition to the lack of a workforce – troubled profoundly the daily economy and the food-processing industry specifically.<sup>[7]</sup> The army, by means of requisitions (law of 5 July 1877), acquired in a temporary or definitive way numerous products and goods. These requisitions affected various products, at various times and various places. From spring 1915, wines from the Languedoc region, and soon after all other regions of wine production, were struck by the requisitions to supply the daily quarter (then half-liter in 1916) to all the soldiers on the battlefield.<sup>[8]</sup> In other regions, wheat was requisitioned at the same time, essentially to limit the speculative practices.<sup>[9]</sup> In zones where the Allied armies were stationed, the latter also had a right of requisition over the local resources, such as the British army in its own zone since 25 February 1915.<sup>[10]</sup>

Rather logically, these measures, motivated by the conditions of the conflict and justified by a

collective self-sacrifice, were presented as exceptional. Yet, they remained permanent with a number of debates in [Parliament](#). As a consequence, there was an increase of complaints and legal appeals from the various actors of the sector. Another logical consequence, also resulting from the lack of a workforce, turned out to be the shortage situation that surfaced as early as 1915, weakening the civilian populations, who partially sacrificed in the collective effort for the benefit of the soldiers.<sup>[11]</sup> However, the French state, just like the Allies who set up dedicated committees (*food boards*), approached the question of the provisioning in a global way and adapted to the stakes of a more and more [total war](#). In September 1914, a Provisioning Department was created within the Ministry of Trade and in December 1916, a new Ministry of the Public Works, Transports and the Provisioning was entrusted to [Édouard Herriot \(1872-1957\)](#). In 1917, its transformation into a Ministry of the General Provisioning, then the Provisioning and the Agriculture, illustrated the planned economy set up regarding food and provisioning during the war. From then on, the state, now strongly supervising the food markets in order to avoid downward spirals (speculation) and "selfish" behavior, established individual cards of food supply in 1917 and consumption tickets in 1918.<sup>[12]</sup> Other measures that were introduced aimed to regulate distribution and promote equity between consumers. In restaurants, the opening hours were reduced, and the number of dishes on the menu were limited. The most sensitive foodstuffs, such as bread, meat, milk or sugar, were gradually rationed. However, the late introduction of the sugar and bread ration cards (1917-1918) shows how the shortage was more efficiently controlled than in [Germany](#) or [Austria](#).

These food concerns were the subject of discussions and measures at the level of the Allies also, which in November 1916 set up an executive commission for wheat (*wheat executive*). This rapidly served as a model for the many Allied Food Committees. This coordination of means also involved the establishment of an Allied maritime transport pool in the spring of 1917, which transported 10 million tons of food from July 1917 to July 1918. Despite their imperfections, these structures supported much higher supply capacities than those of the Central Powers.

## Large scale logistics

In this context, in order to meet the needs of civilians and above all of the soldiers, the state implemented various mechanisms and strategies to meet one of the first human needs: to eat. French soldiers, 8 million in total during the conflict, depended on daily rations provided by the services of military *intendance* (Supply Corps). Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, relying on medical studies, the French army had settled for rations providing 3,200 calories a day and up to 4,000-4,400 calories in winter or when the soldiers were in combat (*ration forte*).<sup>[13]</sup> The theoretically distributed rations do not reveal the real consumptions of the soldiers, which differed according to the fronts, the degree of engagement of the soldiers (frontline/rear area), the rank (officer/soldier). The food of French soldiers was therefore more diversified than what was provided by military rations.

For soldiers, supplies were mainly provided by warehouse stations (called "*Stations magasins*"), which shipped daily food rations to the units that depended on them. In 1914, there were seventeen

stations, a figure that rose rapidly to twenty-three in 1915. At the end of 1915, they distributed 2.9 million rations per day (for 2.7 million men mobilized at the front, to which 740,000 horses should be added).<sup>[14]</sup> The role of the stations was essential: on several hectares, they received, processed, and stored the goods that were then sent to the front by “special trains.” There, they were dispatched to their units (“daily supply train”, twelve to fifteen cars for [infantry](#) divisions).<sup>[15]</sup> These structures, like for instance Saint-Cyr station, assigned to the 5<sup>th</sup> Army, were real agro-food factories, able to feed up to 300,000 men each. They were flanked by six cold-storage warehouses that shipped frozen meat (Marseille, Bordeaux, Paris, Dunkerque, Le Havre, Dijon), two special stations for fresh vegetables (Paris-La Villette and Lyon-Brotteaux) established from 1915 onwards, as well as bread-making stations near the troops (three established between December 1914 and June 1915 in Troyes, Montières and Bourbourg), to which one can add the huge army bakeries located near train stations or *stations magasins*.

There were numerous exceptions to this plan. Indeed, the statutory foods were often accompanied by so-called “ordinary” food (cheese, cans, dried vegetables, pastas) or “substitution” food (horse meat, salmon or tuna in cans, *charcuterie*, pastas or carrots). There were also exceptional distributions, for example on Bastille Day or New Year's Day. Besides, in the war zone, the Provisioning Service managed its own livestock (by late 1916, between 1,800 and 2,000 heads of cattle were sent to the battle zone every day<sup>[16]</sup>) whereas the Agricultural Department dealt with the military agricultural workforce assigned to the civilians to help them with fields tasks (part of these harvests will be of use then to the armies). In the same order and purpose, abandoned lands were, too, put in culture by the same teams.<sup>[17]</sup> Finally, to fight against the inflation in the war zone and the overwhelming proliferation of *mercantis*<sup>[18]</sup> at the front, the general staff set up structures of food distribution which allowed the soldiers to improve their everyday life: *camions-bazars* [“retailing trucks”] from 1915, then cooperatives, generalized from 1916.<sup>[19]</sup> Both, although being general retailers, supplied mainly foodstuffs, essentially wine.

Without reaching the degree of improvement and specialization of military logistics, various measures were also taken to benefit civilians. These concerned first of all the exchanges with the foreign countries, with deep destabilizing effects. Previously imported products from Germany, like sugar, were now bought in the [United States](#), the Antilles or the Dutch colonies.<sup>[20]</sup> Other agriculturally-related goods considered strategic, were forbidden to export, flours or phytosanitary products for example.<sup>[21]</sup> Besides, to compensate for the national deficiencies of products originated from the battle zones or from deprived zones, France imported diverse products (cattle, wine, dried vegetables for example) from foreign countries ([Netherlands](#), the United States, Venezuela, Cuba, [Canada](#), Mexico, Scandinavian countries, etc.). As a consequence, trading networks were profoundly reconfigured and many actors of the sector had to readapt, wholesalers in particular.<sup>[22]</sup>

Moreover, in order to meet the needs of the civilian population, particularly those in the battle zone, authorities envisaged priority circuits to supply the population in the invaded then reconquered

territories from 1914 onwards.<sup>[23]</sup> In the meantime, while the free market had been the standard at the beginning of the conflict for the civilians, from 1915 onwards, the state controlled the flow and the prices of certain products,<sup>[24]</sup> thanks to specialized advisory committees in charge of estimating food stocks and checking whole and retailing prices (for example sugar or coffee). The next step was taxation (maximum price) from 1916 (frozen meat, potatoes, milk or butter), then in 1917 the institution of interministerial committees managing certain food-processing sectors like wheat or wine.<sup>[25]</sup> This was carried out in conjunction with the Department of the Civil Provisioning, created in September 1914 in the bosom of the Ministry of Trade with Fernand Chapsal (1862-1939) at its head.<sup>[26]</sup> Sharp and particular attention was also paid to the food supply of the foreign workers, as for example the Portuguese or the Spaniards working for the national defense, for whom a special note "about the culinary tastes of the workers" was promulgated.<sup>[27]</sup> In addition, the agricultural production was firmly supervised: at the end of 1915, with the stated goal to efficiently evaluate the productive capacities of every region and to maximize them, the *comités consultatifs d'action économique* (consultative committees of economic action) were created,<sup>[28]</sup> whereas agricultural permits became widespread in 1916 to allow soldiers to participate in the harvests for fifteen to twenty days.<sup>[29]</sup> A large number of specialized committees were also created, such as the one to develop the mechanical culture.<sup>[30]</sup> In 1918, a decree established the Office of Agricultural Reconstruction with the objective to accelerate the restoration of damaged lands in the destroyed regions.

## Coping with food shortages

### Mobilizing stomachs

In August 1914, in Paris, German and Austrian food shops, cafes and restaurants were attacked by crowds that ransacked the *Café viennois*, the *Pschor brasserie*, the *Appenrodt* restaurant or the Maggi dairies, the latter from [Switzerland](#), but long accused by the *Action française* to finance Germany.<sup>[31]</sup> These nationalist demonstrations, typical of the mobilization phase in European capitals, illustrated both the classic food fears of conflict situations and the patriotism rooted in the duration of the First World War. In [France](#), the Prussian occupation and the siege of 1870-1871 were anchored in the collective memory: people feared scarcity, hoarding and starvation. The spirit of *Union Sacrée* crystallized national food identities around some products and emblematic dishes of France, such as white bread and wine, embodying an abundance and gastronomic superiority auspicious for the outcome of the conflict. Cartoons stigmatized food associated with the German enemy, such as pork, cabbage or *K.K.'s bread* [*Kriegsbrot* or war bread], symbols of a peasant rusticality barely able to contribute victory in an industrial war.<sup>[32]</sup>

On the contrary, the sharing of food among allies was part of the solidarity that was expressed in the context of the war effort. In August 1914, soldiers *en route* to the front received water, wine, bread, and some food supplementing the packages prepared by the families. These simple gestures,

offerings of the civilians to those who were leaving to defend them, were largely [photographed](#) and used for [propaganda](#), as a concrete incarnation of the *Union sacrée*. During the conflict, food aid was set up to help [refugees](#) from the invaded regions, orphans or poor soldiers. The action of organizations such as the [Red Cross](#) contributed to the establishment of long-term international food aid.<sup>[33]</sup> In the invaded and [occupied northern part of France](#), Germany refused to supply the civilian population, contrary to the Hague Convention (1907). The plunder and requisitions of the German army threatened the population with famine. From April 1915, the Commission for Relief in Northern France ensured the local distribution of food sent by the [Commission for Relief in Belgium](#) (CRB). In northern France, more than 2 million people depended on these food supplies, which provided 1,100 to 1,300 calories a day, free of charge to the needy and for a small fee to others.<sup>[34]</sup>

The theme of "*économies*" (self-restrictions), like in most of belligerent countries, became central in a context of high cost of living, targeting food as a priority. People were patriotically encouraged by the media by way of posters or postcards to restrict their food consumption. Saving coal was a priority. This was also the case of the most sensitive [raw materials](#), essential to the rations of the soldiers. The arguments connected the spontaneous sacrifice of civilians, within their homes, with the ultimate sacrifice of the soldiers at the front. Individual contributions were aimed to limit and complete state regulation in the context of sustainable food development adapted to the constraints of total war.

### **Collective catering at the front**

Food for soldiers was subject to tensions because of the harsh supplying conditions on the front, even though the French army had managed to provide the necessary calories for the survival of the soldiers throughout the conflict. The issue of reserves illustrate these constraints: so-called "*réserve*" food was part of the soldier's regulatory equipment, including canned goods, army biscuits (hardtack), and water. Many soldiers, finding themselves isolated during the fighting, in [no man's land](#) or a shell hole, owed their survival to this. On the [Macedonian front](#), where the French had been engaged since October 1915, the [naval war](#) and the absence of hinterland complicated the supplies. To avoid scurvy, 1,500 hectares of vegetable gardens produced beans, potatoes and cabbages supplementing the canned rations. Food tensions also emerged from the varying performance of military logistics. The French army was one of the only armies not to have field kitchens in 1914, unlike the Germans or the Japanese. Set up in 1915, the *roulantes* rationalized meal preparation by dividing the number of cooks needed for a company of 250 men by six, and improving the living conditions of soldiers by bringing hot meals (soup and coffee) close to the frontline. An essential service that got closer to the soldiers during the conflict, like medical care did as well.

The ration for the French soldiers was not different, broadly speaking, from that of other armies: soup, bread, drinks. The soup contained a significant amount of meat, up to 500 grams a day, animal proteins being considered as an essential fortifier. The French army favored rice, potatoes and macaroni, because of their conservation qualities. The bread was also served in large quantities, around 700 grams per person per day. It served as a test of the command's ability to meet the needs

of the troop. Military rations lacked fresh produce such as vegetables or eggs. Certain elements distinguished French rations from those of other belligerents. In the morning, coffee was served, a ritual adopted by the masses for breakfast since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Meals were accompanied by loaf bread whose superior taste over that of the enemy was often touted. Wine was also a central element of the identity of the French "*poilu*", embodied by the song "*Vive le poilard !*", written around 1916.<sup>[35]</sup> As military reports stated, wine quickly became a "first necessity item" in the trenches.<sup>[36]</sup> However, water remained the most common drink for soldiers, even if the consumption of wine had the advantage of preserving them from the epidemiological risks attached to dirty water. Men received 0.25 then 0.5 and 0.75 liters of wine a day in rations. Wine, then considered a food, was used for its tonic and caloric effects (400 calories per day). The ration also included six cl of *eau-de-vie*, a supposed stimulant. The wine was also of interest for the endurance and the morale of the troops, distributed after battle by the officers as a reward. It was an essential element of the gift and counter-gift economy at the front and served to promote discipline.<sup>[37]</sup>

The magnitude of orders placed by the army encouraged the industrialization of the agro-food sector, mainly benefiting large companies able to cope with the task. This was the case of Olibet in Gironde or Lefèvre-Utile (LU) in Nantes, for army biscuits; of Menier in Noisiel for chocolate, Saupiquet in Finistère for canned vegetables, meat or fish. Savvy entrepreneurs like camembert makers from Normandy or Jean Hénaff (*pâtés*) from Brittany found new opportunities in military markets. Preserves, well adapted to the supply of the front, developed during the First World War, while they were still a luxury product before the war, the least expensive boxes of sardines Amieux costing eighty centimes.<sup>[38]</sup> Processing of meat, packaged in tins, or imported refrigerated, illustrates the massive industrialization of certain sectors during the conflict. The "*singe*", boiled beef in box, a staple in French rations, became the emblem of the poor quality of collective catering at the front. Uprooted soldiers were desperate by the ubiquity and the lack of taste of bully beef. They could trace the taste of the food products from their region in the parcels sent by their families but also by philanthropic committees often containing regional specialties or dishes prepared by their mothers or their wives, which were also proof of the strength of social ties during the war.

Of course, mealtime punctuated the day of the combatants. When the frontline was difficult to access, ration parties left to fetch food for the comrades, returning with twenty to thirty kilograms of food. Some never came back from this dangerous task. The meal was a moment of conviviality for the squad, this unit of fifteen men who shared the miseries at the front and that Henri Barbusse staged in *Le Feu*. The officers took their meals separately and in more comfortable conditions than the soldiers: the military hierarchy remained very marked, even if the good chief, like the good comrade, was also the one who shared his food delicacies with his men.<sup>[39]</sup>

Food played a central role in having the endurance to fight. In correspondence, the fighters often commented it, like this soldier who noted in March 1917 that "the loaves of bread are much smaller, so often in the evening you have to tighten your belt. If it goes on, there's going to be trouble, because no bread, and we will not march."<sup>[40]</sup>

The most frequent complaints targeted the lack of variety and taste of rations, the fatty and indefinable dishes based on “*singe*”, but also sometimes their meager quantity. The importance of food for endurance was understood by the command structure, and, in the context of the French mutinies during the spring of 1917, Philippe Pétain (1856-1951), now General-in-Chief, would strive to improve the quality of rations that was among the recriminations of soldiers. Such attention to the role of food in discipline and morale was also a sensitive issue for the **colonial troops**, who received, according to the practices already in use in the **Empire** before 1914, adapted rations taking into account cultural habits or religious prohibitions.<sup>[41]</sup> For North African Muslims, wine, alcohol and pork (including bacon) were replaced by tea, beef, mutton, dates, semolina and vegetable oil. The first canned couscous was very popular among them. In the Senegalese camps of Fréjus and Saint-Raphaël, where black troops were sent during winter after 1916, the practice of Islam increased during the war, which helped in unifying the diet. In these camps, the gathering of as many as 50,000 soldiers in 1918 imposed large-scale catering. An appreciated supplement was provided by kola nuts used for their stimulating properties, hence their nickname of ‘Senegalese plonk’ (*le pinard sénégalais*).

### **Shortage under control in the home front**

In France, the food situation in the rear had deteriorated considerably since 1914, even though, at the end of the conflict, famine had been avoided, as in most of the Allied countries. Bread, one of the only commodities whose price remained practically unchanged throughout the conflict (at forty-three to fifty centimes per kilogram) was, in the French context, the ultimate test of the state’s capacity to face food shortages. Stocks of flour and mills were requisitioned in 1914 and from April 1916, the “National Bread” replaced the white bread with a brown bread (extraction rate of 80 to 85 percent). National and local authorities thus avoided an unsustainable price hike on basic products and a severe shortage that would have precipitated a social crisis. The food situation was in any case worse for the enemy by the end of 1916 and would continue to deteriorate in ever greater proportions.

Rising prices were a major concern for civilians, embodied in constant lamentations about “*la vie chère*”, although it is difficult to draw a general picture as local situations varied. After a period of price increases in August-September 1914 that were linked to the chaos of the first weeks of war, inflation remained contained until the spring of 1915 when it affected in particular sugar, butter, milk or meat. If queuing for food was inevitable in French cities, a massive black market was avoided. New products, such as the low cost U.S. refrigerated meat, made a breakthrough, relieving the budgets of the working classes. Manufacturers of processed food, such as concentrated broths or Layton powdered eggs, accessed new markets, with higher quality standards than in Germany where substandard *ersatz* prevailed.

The rationalization of food practices was a response to the constraints of supply and to savings requirements for civilians as part of their participation in the war effort. “Economical” cooking recipes

were based on recommendations from the domestic economy dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, urging women to become professionals in their own homes and effective budget managers for low-cost quality food. These principles were extended during the war to all social classes, to save energy and raw materials. In the same vein, these principles recommended the use of the hay box or *marmite norvégienne*, a cooking process without energy and saving fuel (from 50 to 75 percent less coal). Not requiring supervision, it also allowed women employed in war factories to provide family meals despite extended working hours.<sup>[42]</sup> Collective catering for men and women working in war factories increased: cooperatives, shops and canteens were offered at the workplace, saving time for war production and helping to lower the cost of living. But most of them did not survive the war.<sup>[43]</sup>

In the current state of research, it is difficult to give a global picture of the way in which food consumption evolved in France during the war. Food shortages had far-reaching consequences in cities, especially in Paris, in connection with the dependence of the capital on external food markets before the war (French or international). The supply of fresh produce, such as vegetables or eggs, was the most affected, causing significant increases in price. The installation of war gardens in public spaces or on Paris balconies could only compensate for a small part of what was missing in the city. The soup kitchens set up for the poorest, the refugees or the children testified to the municipal and private support of basic food needs.<sup>[44]</sup> An abundant production of economical cookbooks for city-dwellers offered them solutions to cope with the restrictions and the departure of domestic workers in the more lucrative war factories. While some recipes, inspired by home economics principles, were adapted to the stakes of wartime food shortages, others offered unrealistic recipes and were mostly symbolic contributions to the war economies.<sup>[45]</sup> In the countryside or among the working classes, the impact of the war was different and the need for adaptation less important, because the diet remained based on the consumption of basic products such as soup and bread. Indeed, for economic reasons, taking advantage of each resource, avoiding costly products or saving leftovers was already part of the daily habits of these groups before the war. For the working classes, the conflict did not reactivate earlier dietary practices, whereas the middle class and the bourgeoisie, who had become accustomed to modern consumption patterns for the past twenty or thirty years, had to take a bigger step to adjust to the new precarious economic conditions imposed by the war. But since France was not struck by fierce scarcity and starvation incidents like in other countries (Germany and [Russia](#) mainly), there was not a large gulf concerning access to food between social groups and areas ([rural/urban](#)), even if ways to respond to the shortage differed.

## Conclusion

Feeding the civilian and military populations was therefore a central issue in the war effort in France during the First World War. The state put in place integrated food policies that cared for both the supply of the military and the standard of living of civilians. The “mobilization of the stomachs” went through the regulations, the adaptation of the food consumption and the narratives in favor of a sustainable development of food. At the end of the conflict, the Central Powers appeared unable to

cope with the food challenges of total war, which played a role in their defeat. In France, like other allied countries such as Great Britain or the United States, these issues have been better understood and the policies put in place more effective. This distinction, linked to the different kinds of mobilization – intensive in authoritarian regimes, extensive in democratic ones – implying a variation of individual and collective responses to the war effort,<sup>[46]</sup> was essential in a total war, even if French people had to face moderate deprivations of food compared to those of Central Powers.

Emmanuelle Cronier, Université de Picardie-Jules Verne

Stéphane Le Bras, Université Clermont-Auvergne

Section Editor: [Nicolas Beaupré](#)

## Notes

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