RECONSTRUCTING THE COUNTRYSIDE OF THE EASTERN SOMME AFTER THE GREAT WAR

With 6 figures

HUGH CLOUT

Zusammenfassung: Wiederaufbau der Agrarlandschaft im östlichen Teil des Departement Somme nach dem 1. Weltkrieg

Allgemeine Fragen nach Auswirkungen des 1. Weltkrieges sind wissenschaftlich häufig behandelt worden. Im Gegensatz hierzu gibt es kaum Untersuchungen, die sich mit dem schwierigen und komplizierten Prozeß des Wiederaufbaus und der Restrukturierung in Nordfrankreich befaßt haben. Der vorliegende Beitrag greift diese Frage für ein im Bereich der Westfront gelegenes, stark betroffenes ländliches Gebiet auf. Nachdem das Ausmaß der Kriegszerstörungen aufgezeigt und das Grundprinzip des Wiederaufbaus dargelegt ist, wird die Verbreitung der Kriegszerstörungen im Departement Somme dokumentiert. Schon während und unmittelbar nach dem Krieg wurden aufgrund verschiedener staatlicher Maßnahmen Behelfsarbeiten ausgeführt, die jedoch bei der betroffenen Bevölkerung sehr unpopulär waren. Durch diese Notprogramme konnten jedoch weite Teile der Region erneut einer landwirtschaftlichen Nutzung zugänglich gemacht, landwirtschaftliche Gebäude repariert und zahlreiche Behelfsunterkünfte errichtet werden. Der Beginn eines konsequenten und nachhaltigen Wiederaufbaus begann jedoch nicht vor 1922. Getragen wurde dieser Prozeß von genossenschaftlich organisierten Wiederaufbaugesellschaften, die es auch denjenigen, die besonders schwere Verluste erlitten hatten, ermöglichten, sich zusammenzuschließen und den Wiederaufbau gemeinsam auf kollektivem Wege zu betreiben. Entgegen anfänglich sehr pessimistischer Vorhersagen, die in dem Wiederaufbau des stark verwüsteten Landes ein hoffnungsloses Unterfangen sahen, gelang eine umfangreiche Wiederherstellung. Versuche der Sozialisten, deutsche Bauarbeiter hinzuzuziehen, um auf diese Weise eine internationale Kooperation zu fördern, schlugen fehl. So blieben die Wiederaufbau-Kooperativen das wesentliche Element des erfolgreichen Aufbaus von Dörfern und kleinen Städten. Die Grundeigentümer des Departement Somme trafen die ungewöhnliche Entscheidung, ihr Farmland als Beitrag in das gemeinschaftliche Wiederaufbauprogramm einzubringen. Innerhalb von ca. 12 Jahren nach dem Waffenstillstand konnten auf diese Weise wesentliche Elemente des Landschaftscharakters der Vorkriegszeit wiederhergestellt werden. Möglichkeiten zu einer Modernisierung der Agrarlandschaft wurden nicht genutzt. Der teilweise wiederbesiedelte ländliche Raum des Departement Somme steht heute unter dem landschaftsprägenden Einfluß des Krieges in Form von Soldatenfriedhöfen, nationalen Monumenten und Kriegsdenkmälern, zu denen die Besucher der Ausstellung in Péronne entlang der *Circuit de la Grande Guerre* geleitet werden.

1 Introduction

Eighty years have passed since the First World War broke across broad stretches of northern France and devastated the landscapes of town and countryside alike. The events of that war were recorded in official histories and in personal memoirs, and several generations of historian have devoted their energies to analysing and interpreting their political, economic and cultural significance. By contrast, relatively little attention has been devoted to the recovery of the region which, with some honourable exceptions, is usually dismissed in a few lines or paragraphs (HARTKE 1932, MICHEL 1932).

The same emphasis is reflected in the newly opened *Historial de la Grande Guerre* which results from the ambitious decision of the *Conseil-Général de la Somme* to establish a major museum and documentation centre. Housed in a splendid new building, constructed within the framework of the *château* at Péronne, the *Historial* places its focus firmly on the events and experiences of war, and devotes only a small fraction of its spacious display galleries to the vital task of reconstruction. Likewise, a well-signposted *circuit* directs motorized visitors out from Péronne to a selection of battle sites and to military cemeteries, as well as indicating in the present landscape where the front line stood at critical moments during the war. By contrast, virtually no mention is made of the farmsteads, houses, churches, schools and *mairies* that were rebuilt during the 1920s and form the major components in the present settlement pattern. Using evidence included in reports presented to the *Conseil-Général de la Somme* by Prefects Morain and Emery during the 1920s, information from journals and newspapers, and a range of other sources, the present essay explores both the impact of destruction and the complex process of recovery.

2 General principles

One might suppose that defining the war-torn zone would pose few problems, since the evidence of trenches and shell craters, ruined houses and devastated

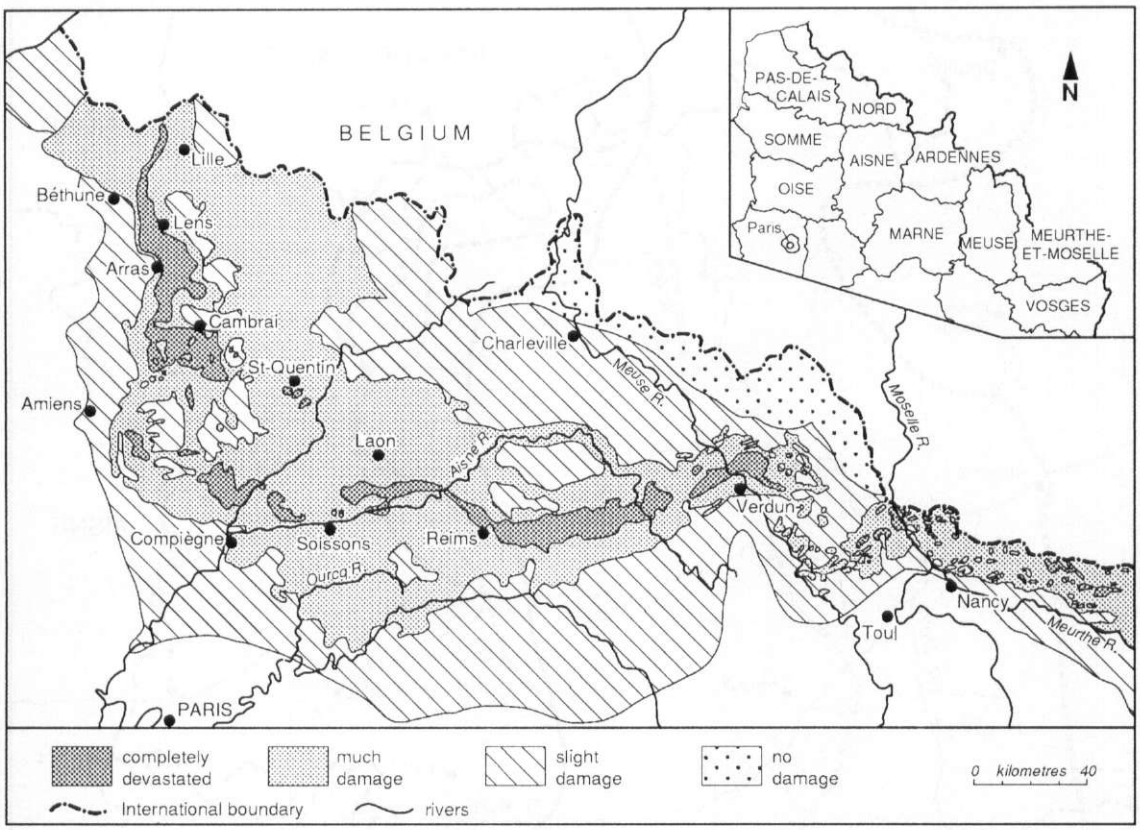

Fig. 1.: The *régions dévastées* of northern France
Source: Guicherd a. Matriot (1921), Michel (1932)
Kriegszerstörte Regionen in Nordfrankreich

farmlands was there for all to see. In practice, the operation proved highly controversial, being bound up not only with the shifting pattern of military engagement but also with the rights of those who had suffered loss *(sinistrés)* to claim compensation. After numerous investigations, the 'war zone' of northern France was recognized officially as covering 3 300 000 ha extending from the Swiss frontier to the Channel coast (Michel 1932). Ten *départements* in their entirety acquired the title of *régions dévastées,* which was transformed to *régions libérées* after the Armistice (Fig. 1). Over 4700 *communes* composed the *régions dévastées,* of which 423 (9%) escaped damage but 620 (13%) were razed to the ground (Ministère des Régions Libérées 1923). Some 1334 (28%) were 'more than half destroyed', while the remaining 2349 (50%) were 'less than half destroyed'. Approximately 867 000 houses and farm buildings experienced some degree of damage, of which 37% were deemed to have been 'completely destroyed', 19% suffered 'grave damage' and 44% suffered 'partial damage'. In addition, 17 500 public buildings and 23 000 industrial premises underwent some degree of damage.

Once the Armistice had been signed, surveyors were instructed to gather information on damage inflicted to the land surface and present it in cartographic form, using three different tints. Blue was reserved for areas of limited damage (51% of the total area), often at considerable distance from the front line and where much restoration work might be entrusted to local inhabitants (Ministère des Régions Libérées 1923). Yellow (45%) signified that much more sustained work was needed; whereas red defined areas (4%) of very great devastation where the costs of restoration were believed to be greater than the agricultural value of the land could ever warrant. Not surprisingly, the configuration of the 'red zone' was to be strongly contested by returning *sinistrés* who wished to recover their farmland and rebuild their homes.

The notion of financial compensation for war losses was pronounced on 27 October 1914, less than three

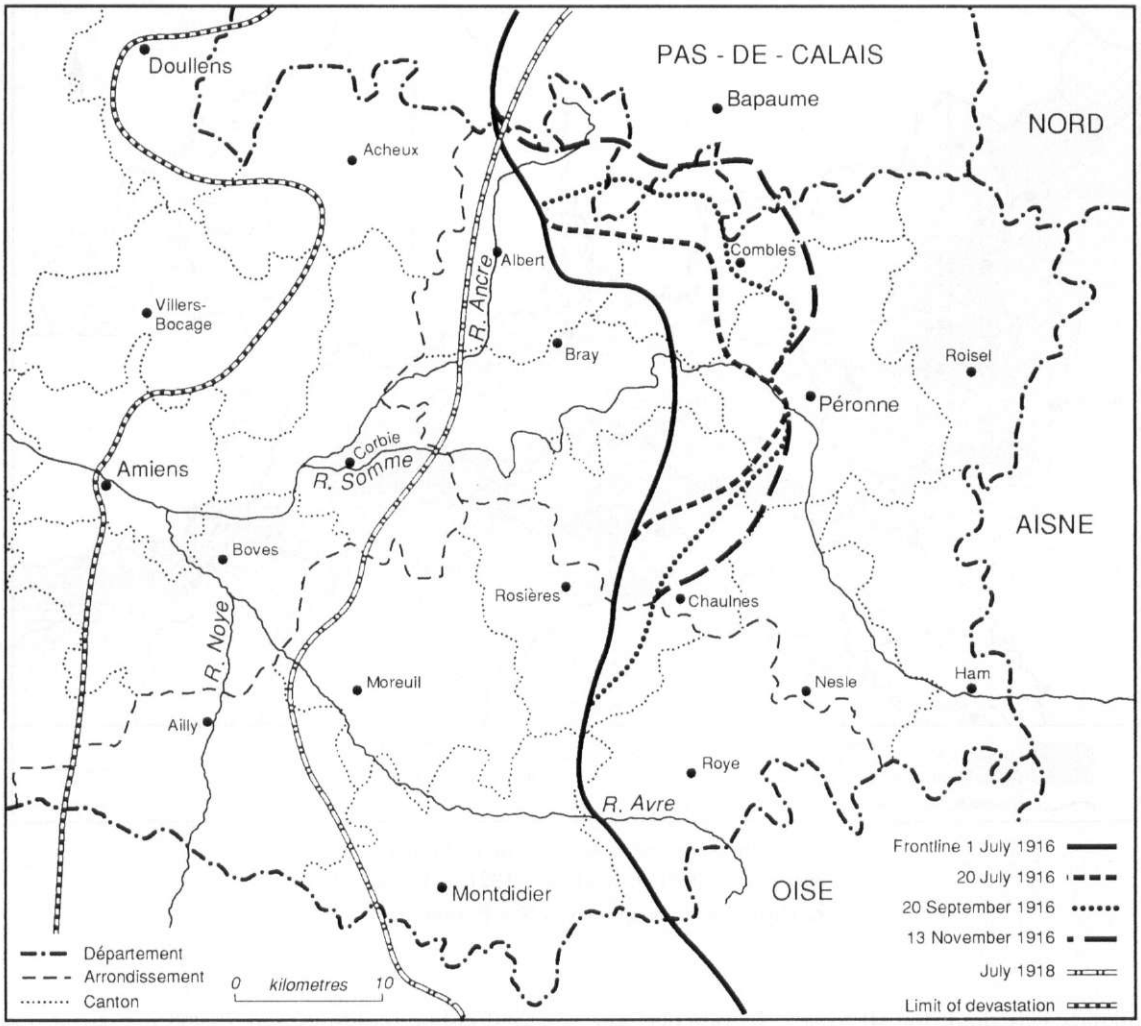

Fig. 2: Changing pattern of the front line in Somme *département*
Source: Pierson a. Désiré (1985), Fossier (1974)
Verlagerung der Frontlinie im Department Somme

months after the war had begun. To move from general principles to precise recommendations took a further four and a half years and involved heated controversy in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies before the great compensation law of 17 April 1919 was passed. Not surprisingly, the subsequent allocation of compensation proved remarkably slow and complicated, for both administrative and financial reasons (Michel 1932).

3 Devastation in the Somme

The present discussion is concerned with the chalk plateau and fertile soils of the eastern part of the Somme *département,* which is traversed by the river of the same name and by canals which avoid its meanders and provide a link between Paris and industrial areas in northern France (Fig. 2). As now, its countryside was dominated by open fields producing fine harvests of wheat and sugar-beet, with meadows alongside the Somme and smaller streams etched into the plateau (Alexandre 1928 a). Nucleated villages contained large, walled farmsteads whose great gateways along village streets concealed farmhouses and hosiery workshops within (Hitier 1902, Demangeon 1905). Smallholders and farmworkers were housed in small cottages, but the rural workforce was declining throughout the *département* in the final decades of the 19th century and at the start of the new century (Pinchemel 1957). The deep, fertile *limon* soils of Picardy

were among the most productive in France, with the Somme *département* yielding an average of 23 hl of wheat and 240 qx of sugar-beet per hectare on the eve of the war, and generating 3.6% and 16% respectively of the national output for those crops (HITIER 1917, 580, Ministère de l'Agriculture 1910–1913).

During their march on Paris in August 1914 the right flank of the German army crossed this section of the Somme and some remained in the city of Amiens until mid September (FOSSIER 1974, 338). Following the Battle of the Marne, the front line was established east of Albert and west of Combles, Chaulnes and Roye (HUBER 1931, 343). One quarter of the *département* had been invaded and roughly 40% of its wheat crop lay behind enemy lines (MORAIN 1918, 174). In 1915 and the first half of 1916 agricultural activities continued as best as possible in the western Somme, using refugee labour, prisoners of war and temporary assistance from the armed forces. During the Somme offensive of July 1916 British and French troops advanced to either side of the river. The Battle of the Somme during the summer and autumn of 1916 shifted the trenches of the front line a few kilometres to the east but at devastating cost to the armed forces (FOSSIER 1974, 388) (Fig. 2). By the end of March 1917 the *département* of the Somme was retaken by allied forces, apart from a tiny fringe in the north-east. One year later, the great German offensive, which began 20 March 1918, pushed the front line back across the *département* to within 15 km of Amiens. Five months later the allied forces took the offensive, with the British entering the ruins of Péronne at the start of September and the Somme being completely liberated on 10 September 1918.

Over four years of war had produced what GAINES described as "the crucifixion of Picardy" (GAINES 1918, 60). The total population of the Somme had dropped from 520 160 in 1911 to an estimated 300 000 at the time of the Armistice (HUBER 1931, 344). Most who remained were in western *communes;* by contrast, the *arrondissement* of Montdidier sheltered only 5000 of its previous total of 56 000, and virtually none of the 93 000 residents of Péronne *arrondissement* remained. Some 381 *communes* in the Somme (45.5% of the total) had experienced varying degrees of damage, with 205 settlements having been completely reduced to rubble and 176 having undergone some kind of destruction (MORAIN 1920, 3) (Fig. 3). Eight hundred houses were destroyed in the city of Amiens, with 2100 gravely damaged and 12 000 partially damaged (CHATELLE 1929). The market towns of Albert, Montdidier and Péronne had been reduced to rubble, and about 200 villages in the eastern Somme had undergone an identical fate (MORAIN 1921, 4). To the north-east of Albert whole villages had "completely disappeared, their ruins being concealed by tall weeds" (RENAUD 1917, 7). According to the so-called official statistics of the *Ministère des Régions Libérées,* 68 748 houses and farm buildings were totally destroyed and a further 50 053 damaged (Ministère des Régions Libérées 1923). In addition, 1373 public buildings required complete reconstruction and 1388 needed repair (MORAIN 1923, 57). Of the 19 500 wells that had been in existence in the eastern Somme in 1914, 2668 had been destroyed and a further 15 000 needed repairs (MORAIN 1921, 73). Roads, railways, canals and rivers were in a desperate condition (THIERRY 1918).

Over half of the land surface of the *département* (616 329 ha) required some kind of restoration, with an early estimate mentioning 451 000 ha (MORAIN 1921, 4) but the 'official' figures published in 1923 reduced this to 367 000 ha (Ministère des Régions Libérées 1923). Some 206 000 ha formed the 'blue zone' in need of simple clearance of shells and debris, a rather smaller 'yellow zone' required more sustained work, and a yet smaller – but highly controversial – surface was judged to be beyond hope of recultivation. Immediately after the Armistice more than 28 000 ha within the Albert, Combles, Bray, Péronne quadrilateral had been identified as 'red zone' (MORAIN 1920, 19). The agricultural expert HITIER concluded "I cannot see how one could hope to cultivate the land again in these places" (HITIER 1917, 582). Nonetheless, the red zone had been reduced to 9000 ha in the official statistics of the *Ministère des Régions Libérées* which appeared four years later and was to be the subject of further revision in the immediate future (Ministère des Régions Libérées 1923).

4 Emergency work

The task of restoring devastated land and providing temporary accommodation did not wait until the Armistice, but was actively pursued during the war. Thus, between the German retreat of March 1917 and their readvance twelve months later, a substantial effort was made by the military, by emergency services organized by the French state, and by civilian agencies (MORAIN 1918, 65). Military labour exclusively was used in the zone close to the front, from which all civilians had been evacuated, and also offered help in more distant areas where civilians and emergency services were at work. The ruined settle-

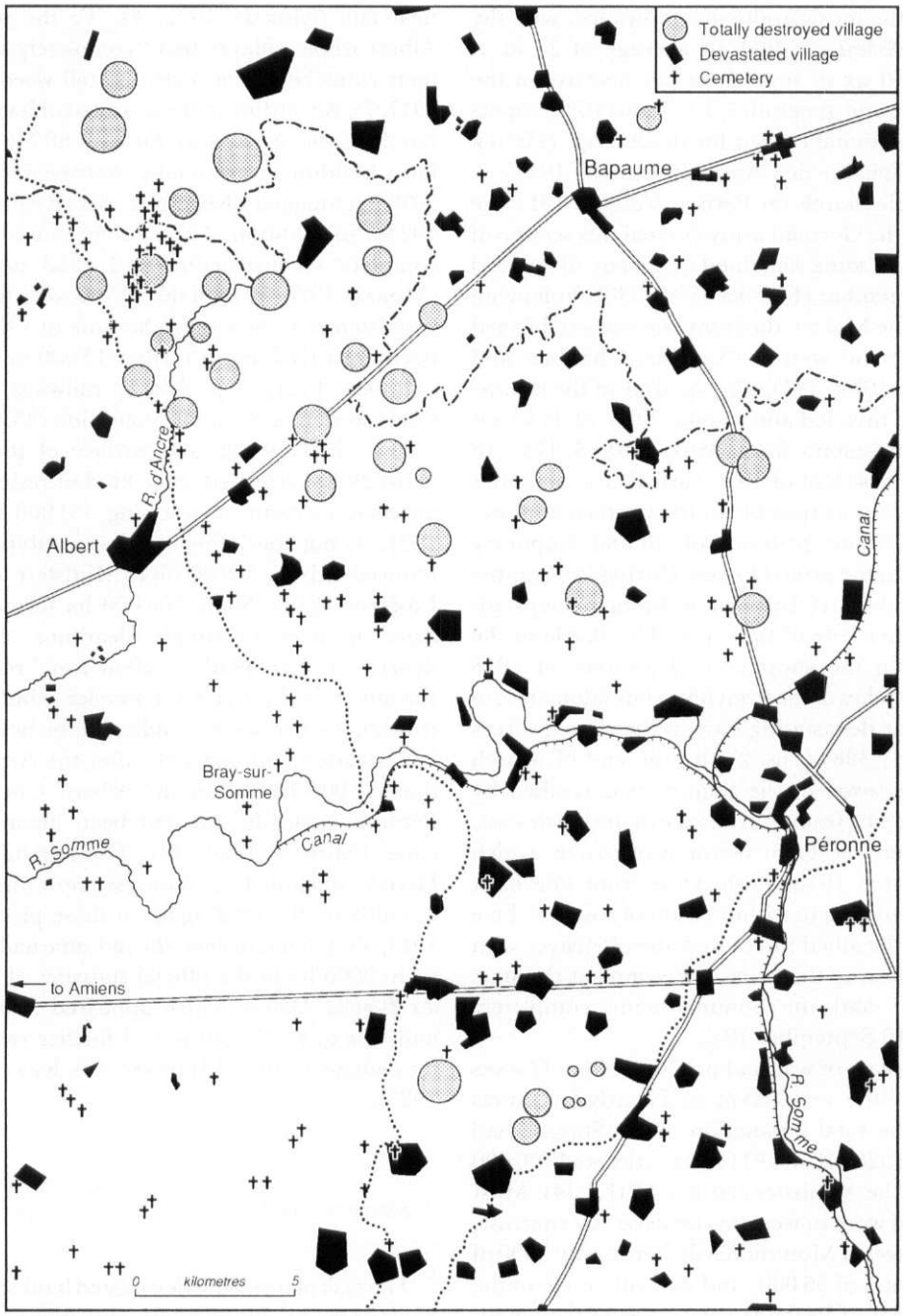

Fig. 3: Detail of destruction in the eastern Somme (The zone overturned by trenches and bombardment lies to the north of the dotted line)

Source: Carte spéciale des régions dévastées; 1:50,000, édition du 15 mars 1920. Archives of the Institut Géographique National, Saint-Mandé

Details der Kriegszerstörungen im östlichen Department Somme (Der durch Schützengräben und Bombardierung zerstörte Bereich liegt nördlich der punktierten Linie)

ments of Nesle, Chaulnes and Roye were selected as depots for distributing building materials, but Ham and Péronne were judged to be too close to the front line. By March 1918 nine subdivisions of the *Ponts-et-Chaussées* were working alongside a dozen building contractors, who not surprisingly encountered grave difficulty in obtaining adequate labour in wartime. The total workforce numbered 790, including 425 prisoners of war, and 160 North Africans. Some 694 provisional dwelllings were installed, together with 22 temporary schools and 2 temporary hospitals, all housed in wooden huts, but some returnees had only tents to sleep in amidst the ruins (HITIER 1917, 587). These initiatives enabled 18 000 evacuees to return to 125 *communes* in the eastern Somme before the German offensive was launched in March 1918 (MORAIN 1918, 65).

The *Service de la Motoculture,* which had been created in April 1917, operated thirteen groups of ten tractors apiece together with other machinery to level and plough disturbed ploughland from which explosives had been removed. By 21 March 1918 9000 ha of ploughland had been sown, due to the efforts of civilians, emergency workers and members of the French and British armed forces (MORAIN 1918, 67). A small number of livestock had been brought back and some wells restored. Over 2000 abandoned farm implements and machines had been collected at Vignacourt and a comparable quantity at Conty to await repair and eventual return to their owners.

The *Office de Reconstitution Agricole* (created August 1917) oversaw these and other stocks and also tried to promote the cultivation of abandoned land by encouraging the establishment of agricultural cooperatives, whereby returning farmers might share resources (MORAIN 1918, 76). By the start of 1918 about twenty cooperatives were in existence around Ham, Nesle and Roye and others were on the point of being created. When not engaged in hostilities, a proportion of both French and British forces was allocated to assist with farmwork. Thus, the British authorities made men and horses available to help level land, fill shellholes, and remove barbed wire. Manure was carted from calvary encampments to fertilize freshly levelled soil and British soldiers undertook harvesting and threshing work, and helped repair abandoned farm machinery (THOMASSIN 1919, 627). A special *mission* liaised between local farmers and the two armies, both to ensure the most effective help and to minimize problems of troops and horses straying into cultivated fields.

The farmers' optimism was dispelled on 21 March when German troops re-invaded and the civilian population had to be evacuated rapidly, to western parts of the Somme or into the interior of France. Many farm livestock had to be abandoned as the civilians fled. In addition, prisoners of war, who had been used on large Picard farms located more than 30 km from the front line, were withdrawn from all forms of agricultural work in the Somme. By the end of March 1918 German forces were occupying 306 *communes* in the *département* and a further 99 had been evacuated (MORAIN 1918, 69). Allied military camps and depots shifted rapidly westwards and caused unavoidable damage in areas where much restoration had begun.

Once the Armistice had been signed, the state augmented its special services, most notably by establishing the *Service des Travaux de Première Urgence* (STPU) in March 1919, which was directed along quasi-military lines from Paris but with local managers. It had responsibility for organizing labour to perform emergency work, including detecting shells, removing debris, filling trenches and levelling land, and also undertook to erect temporary dwellings and to repair damaged ones, but not to undertake complete reconstruction. At the end of May 1919 the STPU had 2400 civilian workers plus some 12 000 prisoners of war and military personnel under its command (Journal des Régions Dévastées 1919 a). As elsewhere in the northern *départements,* the STPU operated under the most difficult of circumstances with roads, canals and railways all undergoing repair and slates, tarred paper and other materials for repairing damaged dwellings being in desperately short supply (Journal des Régions Dévastées 1919 b). It received severe criticism from *sinistrés,* who wished to recultivate their land and have some kind of decent shelter as soon as possible, and from civil administrators, who believed that the emergency workers were not up to the job.

At a meeting in Amiens in late June 1919 the *sinistrés* expressed their "distress, discouragement and anger" as they questioned why they had been allowed "back to their ruins, only to be abandoned without resources" from the state (Journal des Régions Dévastées 1919 c). Following Clemenceau's visit to the Somme one month later, the STPU was replaced by the *Service des Travaux de l'Etat* (STE) which came more directly under the control of the prefect. In practice, it was largely a change in name only since many staff continued in post. However, the days of the emergency services were numbered and the repatriation of prisoners of war during the second half of 1919 removed much of their *raison d'être.* The STE was finally disbanded in the spring of 1920 (MORAIN 1920, 5).

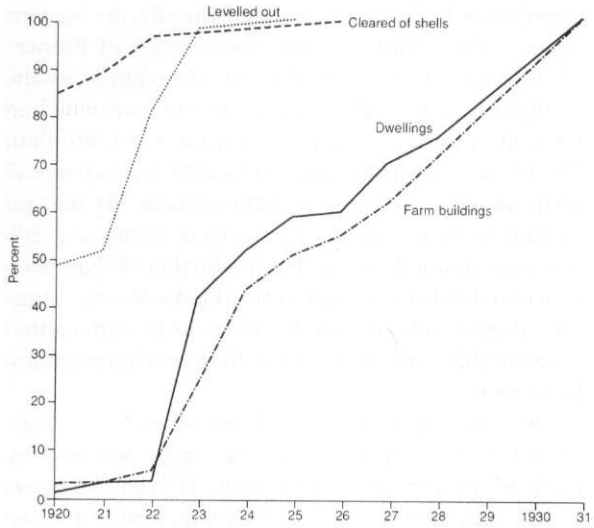

Fig. 4: Restoration of land and settlement 1920–1931 (100 = situation in 1914)
Source: Ministère des Travaux Publics: Service des Régions Libérées (1929), MICHEL (1932)
Wiederherstellung von Flur und Siedlung 1920–1931 (100 = Zustand 1914)

The *Service de la Motoculture* continued to function once the Armistice had been signed, with the number of tractor teams increasing from 13 (180 tractors) at the start of 1919 to 22 (274) at the end (MORAIN 1920, 4). Some tractors were very large and powerful, consuming great quantities of petrol at a time when supplies were desperately short. Only 34 564 ha were worked over during 1919 and Prefect Morain argued that 80 more tractors were needed so that more attention might be paid to the most devastated localities. In view of the limited progress (186 161 ha ploughed during 1920) some *sinistrés* had already decided to channel their frustration into founding local cooperatives for levelling land, ploughing and fertilizing the soil, and even requesting that landholding be reorganized. The cooperative at Villers-Carbonnel (near Péronne) provided a remarkable example of local initiative (Journal des Régions Dévastées 1920). Senator René Gouge concluded that cooperation was not only the way forward for restoring land but also for reconstructing whole settlements (Journal des Régions Dévastées 1921). In June 1921 he argued in the Senate that "state involvement has had its day and must come to an end, together with its bureaucracy and useless paperwork, which terrify the *sinistrés*" (Journal des Régions Dévastées 1921a).

5 Achievements of the emergency period

It is difficult to be precise about what was accomplished at this time. According to official statistics assembled by the *Service des Régions Libérées,* 286 700 ha had been cleared of shells and 95 200 ha levelled in the Somme by 1 January 1920, just 13 months after the Armistice had been signed (Ministère des Travaux Publics 1929). Two years later the figures rose to 324 800 ha and 157 900 ha respectively, which represented 97 % and 81 % of what would be accomplished by January 1931 following the revision of the red zone (Fig. 4). Despite criticisms heaped on the emergency services, remarkable progress undeniably had been made in preparing the land for agricultural production, although of course shells would continue to be unearthed and fields would subside as hidden craters opened up (EMERY 1926, 24).

Across the whole *département* 92 % of the pre-war area of ploughland was recorded in 1919 and was to rise to 98 % in the following year, before entering a gradual decline as the Somme became more oriented toward livestock production during the 1920s (Alexandre 1928b) (Fig. 5). However, four years of hostilities and disruption meant that in 1919 total wheat output was only 38 % of the pre-war average (with a mean yield of 18.0 hl/ha) and was to rise to 83 % in the

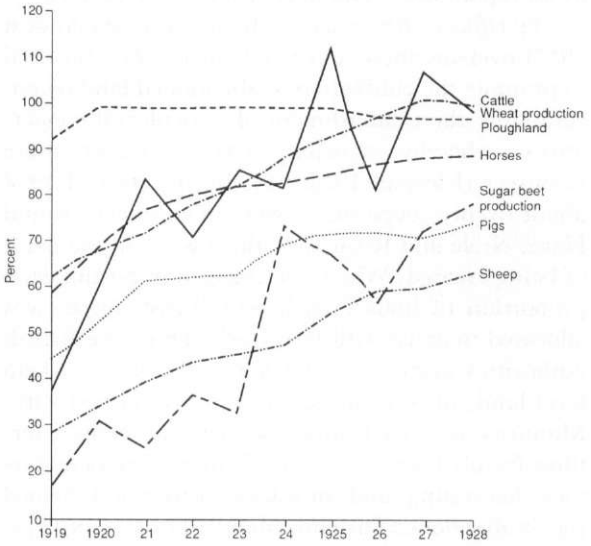

Fig. 5: Indicators of agricultural recovery in Somme 1919–1928 (100 = Average for 1910–1913)
Source: Ministère de l'Agriculture (1920–29)
Indikatoren des Wiederaufbaus der Landwirtschaft im Department Somme 1919–1928 (100 = Mittel der Jahre 1910–1913)

dry summer of 1921, when an amazing yield of 25.0 hl/ha was recorded (Ministère de l'Agriculture, 1919–21). By contrast, sugar-beet production in 1919 was only 14% of the pre-war average, with only 4 sugarworks operating compared with 32 in 1913. Output dipped down in the dry year of 1921 and in the following year was only one-third of the pre-war figure. As livestock were returned from where they had been removed for safe keeping and supplies were sent from Germany as part of the reparations agreement, so the number of farm animals began to increase. By 1922 the Somme contained roughly three-quarters of the number of cattle and horses recorded pre-war, but pigs (61%) and sheep (39%) lagged substantially.

Unlike the achievements of land restoration and agricultural recovery, very few buildings received definitive repairs or were completely reconstructed during the early years of peace for a host of reasons including the fact that compensation details had not been agreed or reconstruction plans approved. In the spring of 1920 Prefect Morain reported that roughly half of the 20 000 temporary dwellings that he estimated to be needed in the *département* had been erected, in the form of 4895 timber houses, 1025 made of more solid material, and 41 000 Nissen huts obtained from the British army (Morain 1920, 27). He hoped that a further 6000 temporary buildings might be installed before winter, together with 3000 unused Nissen huts. The number of temporary dwellings continued to rise, to reach 23 000 provided by the authorities by the spring of 1922, plus a further 1500 purchased directly by the *sinistrés* (Morain 1922 a, 56). A large number of buildings received temporary repairs during 1919 but little was accomplished with regard to permanent repairs or reconstruction. By January 1920 only 1050 dwellings and 932 farm buildings had been restored in this way (Ministère des Travaux Publics 1929). Two years later these figures had risen to 2207 and 2177 respectively, but they represented only 3.6% and 5.9% of what would be achieved by January 1931 (Fig. 4). As Carpentier remarked, this was the real "black spot" in the process of rural recovery in the Somme (Carpentier 1925, 94).

Despite the inability to start definitive reconstruction, the greater part of the civilian population returned to their devastated *département*. According to the census of March 1921 the figure had reached 87% of its 1911 level, with the western *arrondissements* of Abbeville and Amiens being very close to their pre-war figures (Ministère de l'Intérieur 1922). By contrast, the war-torn *arrondissements* of Montdidier and Péronne contained only 77% and 62% of their pre-war figures, with the proportion being particularly low in the *cantons* of Albert (47%), Combles (56%) and Roisel (53%). By virtue of the extremely small volume of definitive repairs and rebuilding that had been accomplished, many of the returnees were required to live in makeshift shelters and in conditions of considerable squalor. Members of the committee of enquiry who visited the *régions libérées* under the auspices of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) in January 1921 encountered evidence of remarkable hardship and suffering among the returnees (Confédération Générale du Travail 1921).

6 Definitive reconstruction

The early years of peace represented not only a time of frustration for the returnees, who wished to have a solid roof over their heads, but also a period of decision-making in which a series of inter-related issues had to be resolved. The extent of the red zone had to be settled in order to determine which farmlands and villages – if any – would have to be excluded from any reconstruction scheme. Ways would have to be found to overcome the shortage of qualified labour on construction sites. In the absence of a state-directed programme of reconstruction, a mechanism would have to be devised to mobilize the compensation claims and general interests of thousands of *sinistrés* in a logical fashion. Finally, the debate had to be resolved between restoring the pre-existing pattern of settlements and fields, which had been damaged or in some cases totally obliterated during the war, or taking advantage of this opportunity to improve their arrangement.

In accordance with the law of 14 March 1919, structure plans had to be drawn up and officially approved before permanent reconstruction of devastated settlements might commence. Costs of employing architects and surveyors to prepare such documents would be borne by the state (Morain 1921, 50). Ambitious ideas for 'model villages' were rapidly overtaken by much simpler projects which involved reconstructing buildings on or very close to their pre-existing sites but incorporated more spacious street layout, improved housing, and new or restored churches, schools and *mairies* (Carpentier 1925, 67). The opportunity was often taken to relocate cemeteries on the margin of the village. In broad terms, the settlement pattern was to be re-created much as before but with rather fewer buildings, as a result of compensation being used to replace two or three buildings by a single dwelling, or

to acquire a house in town rather than to rebuild in a village. At first, 361 *communes* in the Somme were instructed to produce reconstruction plans but by 1923 the total had been adjusted to 338 (Emery 1923, 59). Only 125 projects had been approved by the spring of 1925, which helped explain why work had not begun in the remaining villages (Emery 1925, 36).

6.1 *The 'red zone'*

Sinistrés and administrators often viewed the challenge of restoring the liberated battle zone with a mixture of hope and despair. Echoing the initial belief that the red zone was beyond recovery, Prefect Morain had declared early in November 1928 that over 28 000 ha of former arable land would have to be planted with trees or abandoned to sheep grazing (Morain 1921, 26). This angered many farmers in the eastern Somme and Morain responded positively to their reaction, declaring in the spring of 1920 that more than 20 000 ha would "return to their [agricultural] destiny" (Morain 1920, 19). A few months later the *sinistrés* made their case to President Millerand who instructed that as much land should be restored as possible. Morain promised that the villages in the red zone would be "reborn from their ashes like all the others" and one year later 2500 labourers were clearing ruins from the red zone (Morain 1921, 27).

However, reports from the *Service de la Reconstitution Foncière* and the *Génie Rural* suggested that 5000 ha might have to be abandoned. That conclusion was challenged repeatedly and the boundaries of the red zone were revised many times. In summer 1923 a start had been made on rebuilding a score of villages that had not been envisaged in 1918 (Emery 1923, 19) and in 1928 a mere 441 ha remained classified as red zone in only four *communes* on the Thiepval plateau (Emery 1928, 17). By this time, the term 'red zone' more accurately described the bricks and tiles of reconstructed buildings (Hanotaux 1931, 9). However, cultivation remained precarious in some patches of the battlefield and a few farmers had to abandon ploughland to grazing where the soil horizon had been greatly disturbed (Morain 1922a, 176).

6.2 *Labour as a means of international reconciliation*

The idea of bringing in German craftsmen to help rebuild French villages had been discussed by French and German trades unions and the *Ministre des Régions Libérées* (Le Peuple 1921a, Morain 1921, 44). *Sinistrés* in Somme wished to reconstruct as soon as possible but many urged that this should be "an essentially French operation" calling on labour from colonies and 'friendly' European powers if need be (Morain 1921, 45). However, if there were no alternative to German skilled workers, Morain believed that *sinistrés* might agree to "this last sacrifice" (Morain 1921, 45). In November 1921 the CGT and other trades-unionists organized a visit by their German counterparts to the *canton* of Chaulnes to propose a reconstruction strategy. The German delegation offered to supply craftsmen but not building materials or finance (Journal des Régions Dévastées 1921b).

Claiming to speak for the *sinistrés,* M. Henard argued that, should the "*bocho-communiste* building site" be allowed to open, other Germans will follow and they "will colonize; coming in droves, they will submerge the *sinistrés.* They will operate an invasion plan" (Journal des Régions Dévastées 1921c). By contrast, the CGT newspaper *Le Peuple* insisted that the delegation had been received warmly (Le Peuple 1921b). The *Ministre des Régions Libérées* demanded that the views of all *sinistrés* around Chaulnes be sought and that at least 80% of households must be in favour before he would approve (Meissel 1986, 171). An unofficial enquiry indicated that 86% were in favour. The Minister insisted on an official referendum and supplied additional information. First, the *sinistrés* would be required to form an association to hire labour and organize a programme of work. Individuals would be able to appoint their own architects. Second, the German craftsmen would not be housed in labour camps and would be free to move around the area after work. They would not be billetted on *sinistrés* who themselves were living in appalling makeshift conditions.

Prefect Morain conducted meetings in the dozen *communes* and recorded the views of 303 households. Only 149 (49%) declared in favour and the Minister rejected the proposal. Craftsmen would be sought wherever they could be found and, to the chagrin of the CGT, the ruined villages of the Somme would not be used to promote Franco-German solidarity. Bricklayers, masons and carpenters were enlisted from Italy, Belgium and Poland and to a lesser extent Spain and Portugal. During 1923 thirty craftsmen from the German Rhinelands were, in fact, brought to work on short contracts near Montdidier and gave complete satisfaction (Emery 1924, 107). By April 1923 16 958 building workers were employed on reconstruction work in the *département,* but twelve months later only 11 119 remained (Emery 1924, 102). Neither the state

nor German workers would provide the mechanism for permanent reconstruction, hence the *sinistrés* had to turn to their own resources.

6.3 Reconstruction cooperatives

The Compensation Law of 17 April 1919 was fiercely individualistic in tone but the notion of *sinistrés* grouping together to facilitate the presentation and scrutiny of compensation claims, and, ultimately, the reconstruction of whole villages was not dismissed. Special financial incentives were offered to encourage 'reconstruction cooperatives'. A few had been created in the Marne valley during the war and the principle was adopted enthusiastically in Meurthe-et-Moselle, following the lead of socially-committed clerics and the staff of the *Génie Rural*. Picard farmers, by contrast, were renowned for their stubborn individualism (Carpentier 1925, 62). Prefect Morain launched a propaganda campaign at a congress of local mayors at Amiens in July 1919 (Morain 1920, 33) and continued to encourage reconstruction cooperatives, having been convinced of their utility "from the very first day" (Morain 1921, 46). Over the next twelve months 150 cooperatives, with 6525 members, were created in the Somme but many were on a precarious financial and managerial footing (Morain 1920, 33).

The Law of 15 August 1920 set conditions for cooperatives to be officially 'approved' and thereby to qualify for financial support from the state. They had to adopt model statutes and managerial practices, open their accounts to inspection, and employ officially approved architects and building contractors. To encourage existing cooperatives to be approved and others to be set up, Morain employed special administrative and financial advisers at Amiens and in severely devastated locations (Morain 1921, 47). In addition, three *unions* and a *fédération* of reconstruction cooperatives were established to facilitate book-keeping and to transmit the concerns of local *sinistrés* to the prefecture or to ministries in Paris.

Some 134 of the 150 early cooperatives obtained approved status and additional ones were established. By 3 April 1922 the Somme contained 266 general-purpose reconstruction cooperatives, representing the interests of 9145 *sinistrés,* of whom half owned property in the *arrondissement* of Péronne (Morain 1922, 97). *Sinistrés* in the Somme responded to cooperation more slowly than in Lorraine, but by 1925 there were 370 cooperatives in the Somme with 15 436 members, and the total was to grow to 373 (16 361 members) by 1927 (Carpentier 1925, 63, Emery 1927, 16).

Cooperation offered undoubted advantages over an individualistic approach. Lawyers and surveyors could be employed to guide whole groups of *sinistrés* through the legal maze of claiming and obtaining compensation. Cooperatives could then hire architects and building contractors to design and build new settlements, order materials in bulk and employ sizeable teams of building workers. The villages could be reconstructed according to logical timetables, and professional staff would be aware of legal and technical changes impinging on reconstruction. Despite these positive features, cooperatives in the Somme encountered serious operational difficulties.

Numerous complaints involved details of the timetable of work, architects failing to spend enough time on site, building contractors being poorly organized, and accountants and stocktakers proving inefficient (Emery 1923, 56). Local brickearth was used to supply brickworks at many sites in the area but deliveries of bricks and other building materials were poorly organized and insufficient, especially during the mild years of 1922/23 when reconstruction began to 'take off' in the *département* (Fig. 4). Some cooperatives "had famine at their doors, while others were swimming in abundance" (Bulletin 1923). Nonetheless, a few villages were declared to be three-quarters completed in February 1923, because of dynamic cooperatives and builders. Indeed, subsequent problems had very much to do with inadequate cash flow and the inability of the government both to recover reparation payments and to distribute compensation to the cooperatives (Bulletin 1928). Prefect Emery's statements to the *Conseil-Général* in the second half of the 1920s make depressing reading (Emery 1925–28). Reports of a ministerial visit to the environs of Montdidier and Roye in summer 1927 revealed that many houses had not yet been completed in the surrounding villages (Bulletin 1927). Wooden huts and ruins patched with corrugated iron, planks and tarred paper were still widespread (Alexandre 1928a, 12).

Tantalizingly little is known about the detailed functioning of the reconstruction cooperatives, but their overall achievement is visible in the present landscape. Perhaps most typical are the ordinary brick-built cottages, roofed with Angers slates or occasionally with tiles made from local clay (Emery 1924, 72). Such dwellings are found in their thousands in villages or alongside main roads throughout the war zone. They comprise a kitchen (often 4 m × 4 m), one or two bedrooms, a cellar and an attic. Larger farmhouses are more varied in style but are inevitably brick-built and contrast with the wattle-and-daub walls that had been widespread before the war.

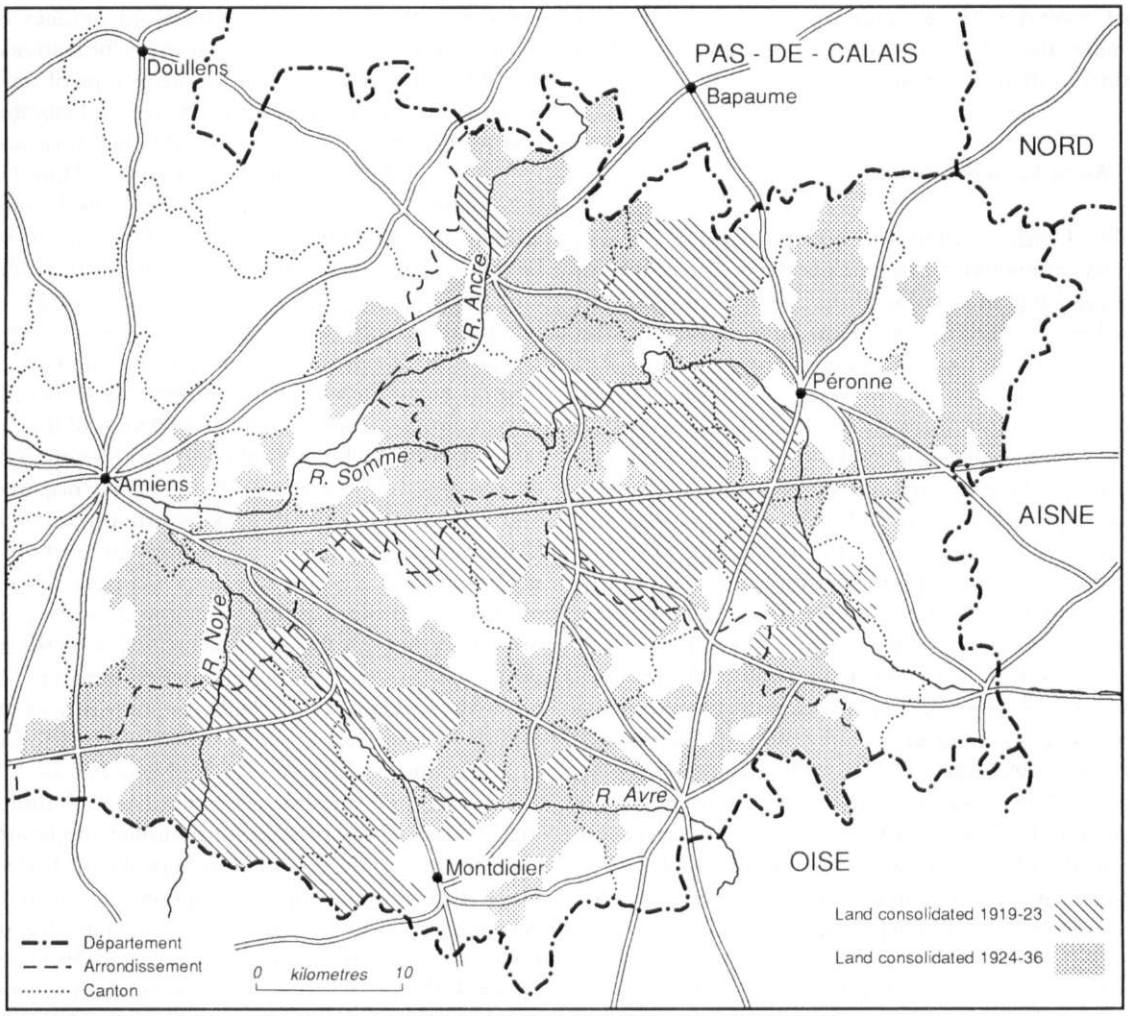

Fig. 6: Remembrement in Somme following the law of 1919
Source: EMERY (1924), RIEUCAU (1966)
Flurbereinigungen im Department Somme aufgrund des Gesetzes von 1919

Reconstruction of schools and *mairies* began in earnest in 1923, with 203 being completed by April 1928 and a further 309 in progress (EMERY 1928, 15). As elsewhere in the northern *départements,* the tasks of repairing and rebuilding churches were undertaken by local diocesan cooperatives which administered funding, commented on architectural designs, and inspected the quality of work on site. By spring 1928 128 village churches had been completed in the diocese of Amiens, with styles varying from the traditional to the strikingly modern, and work was in progress on a further 58 (EMERY 1928, 16). At that time only three general-purpose reconstruction cooperatives, representing a mere 50 *sinistrés,* had finished their work and had settled their accounts (EMERY 1928, 9). Prefect Emery announced that a further twenty were close to completion but that finalizing the accounts was a slow and often controversial matter. Indeed, in January 1931 306 cooperatives were still in existence, but their number was to decline to 240 by the end of the year (MICHEL 1932, Bulletin 1932). Their rebuilding work was certainly over by this time but legal complications dragged on, with some cooperatives still not being dissolved by 1936 (Bulletin 1936).

6.4 Plot consolidation

By contrast with the re-establishment of the pattern of villages and farmsteads, an important opportunity was seized to change the arrangement of agricultural plots in many *communes* in the eastern Somme. The highly fragmented landownership *(morcellement)* that

characterized many parts of northern France had its logic in unmechanized agriculture and in plentiful supplies of labour. By 1914 the agricultural workforce had diminished greatly and this trend continued during and after the war. The case for reorganization was strengthened by three other factors. Trenches, shell-holes and military installations had destroyed field boundaries and traditional markers delimiting open field plots in many *communes*; the tractors of the *Service de la Motoculture* had paid scant attention to property limits; and cadastral maps and registers had been destroyed in many *communes* during the war.

Two pieces of legislation were passed to enable consolidation *(remembrement)* to take place (Rieucau 1966). The first (27 November 1918) covered the whole of France, while the second (4 March 1919) related only to the devastated *départements,* where *communes* were given a choice of reassembling the pattern of landholding as it had been or undergoing *remembrement.* The tasks of redrawing cadastral documents and surveying plots were entrusted to the *Service de la Reconstitution Foncière.* Despite the fact that all costs of *remembrement* would be borne by the state in the war-torn zone, most northern *communes* shunned this innovation. By contrast, the allegedly stubborn and selfish farmers of Picardy were to take far greater advantage of this opportunity than their counterparts elsewhere. In fact, it had been acknowledged that extreme fragmentation raised the cost of cultivation and that voluntary exchange of plots was "not capable of bringing a remedy to this harmful situation" (Archives Nationales 324 AP 47). Investigations of land disturbance in the battle zone in 1916 concluded that it would be impossible for individual landowners to recognize and cultivate their former plots without lengthy and discouraging legal procedures (quoted in Peytral 1927, 495).

The *Service de la Reconstitution Foncière* was set up at Amiens in May 1919 and, with the strong support of Prefect Morain, launched an information campaign to ensure that the option of *remembrement* was understood (Morain 1922b). The matter was delicate and time-consuming, with advisers concentrating initially on devastated *communes* where they believed some "enlightened public opinion" to be found (Morain 1921, 32). Early reactions were particularly positive in Combles *canton,* in response to four factors: extreme fragmentation of landholding and scattering of plots had made cultivation difficult prior to 1914; experience of amiable exchanges softened traditional hostility to change; agricultural labour was scarce and expensive; and the area was in the heart of the red zone. *Remembrement* was supported by the active *Société des Agriculteurs de la Somme* and requests for anything less than consolidation became rare, enabling Prefect Morain to estimate that not fewer than 150 *communes* would select this option (Morain 1921, 33). Their wishes were implemented as soon as land surveyors were available and it must be recognized that *remembrement* could be a disruption for farmers who were desperate to recultivate their land (Archives Départementales de la Somme RL 332256). Despite practical difficulties, 93 schemes had been completed by the spring of 1927 and the total reached 154 two years later (Emery 1927, 28, Ministère de l'Agriculture 1936) (Fig. 6). Although there had been some initial doubts and misconceptions, sustained objections to *remembrement* proved rare since it worked "to the great satisfaction of even those who had been strongly opposed" (Archives Nationales 324 AP/47). No less than 40 per cent of all consolidation work in the northern *départements* was accomplished in the eastern Somme.

7 *The results*

In the dozen or so years that followed the Armistice, the countryside of the eastern Somme was largely restored to its former state of productivity. With the exception of the tiny patches of red zone, virtually all of the land had been cleared of shells and levelled out as early as 1923, although debris kept being turned up by the plough and the collapse of poorly-filled trenches gave rise to localized subsidence (Fig. 4). Wheat production throughout the *département* surpassed the pre-war average in 1925, and cattle numbers returned to their pre-war level in 1927 (Fig. 5). By the following year, sugar-beet production achieved three-quarters of its pre-war level and was being processed by 9 large sugarworks instead of 32 smaller ones in 1913. However, the composition of the rural economy was changing and greater emphasis was placed on livestock husbandry than before.

Reconstruction of villages and farmsteads displayed a different chronology, with work scarcely beginning until 1922 and continuing at varying pace over the next ten years or so (Fig. 4). By January 1931 62157 houses and 37122 farm buildings had been built anew or substantially repaired, by comparison with the 118801 buildings which had been reported as destroyed or having suffered serious damage (Michel 1932). This implies that about one-sixth (16.4%) of private buildings in the eastern Somme had not been restored. In some instances property owners chose to

invest their compensation money elsewhere, but in other cases they replaced several buildings by a single one. There is no way of refining the calculation. Unlike the environs of Verdun, the Chemin des Dames, or the chalky plateau of the Marne, no village sites were abandoned and the rural settlement pattern of the eastern Somme was re-established, although most villages contained fewer buildings than before. Wattle-and-daub was replaced by vivid red brick, whose brightness must have been particularly striking in the 1920s. Seventy years later it has taken on a much duller hue. Compensation money and finance from the *pari mutuel* enabled piped water supplies and electricity to reach the rebuilt settlements, thereby bringing numerous other changes in their train (EMERY 1924, 73). But in the early 1930s few trees had been replanted and many landscapes were even more open than they had been in 1914 (ALEXANDRE 1928 a, 12).

The census of March 1931 recorded 466 630 inhabitants throughout the *département,* compared with 520 160 in 1911 (-10.2%) and 473 910 in 1926, since the long-recognized process of depopulation continued (Ministère de l'Interieur 1927, 1932). It was partially masked by the growing number of foreigners in the Somme, which rose from 3755 in 1911 to 18 690 in 1926 and 18 350 in 1931. At the latter date, the eastern *arrondissements* of Montdidier and Péronne contained 16.8% fewer people than in 1911, with losses being particularly pronounced in the *cantons* of Bray and Rosières (both -23%), Roisel (-33%) and Combles (-36%). In such areas the impact of war had been engraved on the landscape in the form of military cemeteries, national monuments and war memorials whose location was sought by bereaved relatives, by 'pilgrims' recalling the tragedy of international conflict, and by 'tourists' armed with their Michelin guides to the battlefields. A lifetime later, the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* provides an informative starting point for any who may care to explore the reconstructed countryside of the eastern Somme.

References

ALEXANDRE, A.: La vie agricole dans la Picardie orientale depuis la guerre. Paris 1928(a).

- : L'économie agricole de la Picardie orientale depuis la guerre. In: Annales de Géographie 37, 1928(b), 61-73.

Bulletin Mensuel des Unions de Coopératives de Reconstruction des Arrondissements de Montdidier, Amiens, Doullens: La situation. In: February 1923, 1.

- : Au jour le jour. In: August 1927, 1.
- : Les travaux faits depuis six ans. In: May 1928, 6.
- : Les coopératives en 1932. In: January 1932, 1.
- : Les coopératives en 1936. In: January 1936, 1.

CARPENTIER, G.: La reconstitution économique et immobilière dans la Somme dévastée. Montdidier 1925.

CHATELLE, A.: Amiens pendant la guerre, 1914-1918. Paris 1929.

Confédération Générale du Travail: Rapport de la Commission d'Enquête du Conseil Economique du Travail dans les régions dévastées; une politique de reconstruction. Villeneuve-Saint-Georges 1921.

DEMANGEON, A.: La Picardie et les régions voisines: Artois, Cambrésis, Beauvaisis. Paris 1905.

EMERY, P.: Les régions libérées après quatre ans de reconstitution. Amiens 1923.

- : La reconstitution des régions libérées (annually). Amiens 1924-1928.

FOSSIER, R. (Ed.): Histoire de la Picardie. Toulouse 1974.

GAINES, R.: A Village in Picardy. New York 1918.

GUICHERD, J., MATRIOT, C.: La terre des régions dévastées. In: Journal d'Agriculture Pratique 1921, 332-335.

HANOTAUX, G.: En Belgique par les pays dévastés. Paris 1931.

HARTKE, W.: Kulturgeographische Wandlungen in Nordostfrankreich seit dem Kriege. Der Wiederaufbau der zerstörten Gebiete. Berliner Geographische Arbeiten 1, Stuttgart 1932.

HITIER, H.: Le village picard. In: Annales de Géographie 12, 1903, 109-119.

- : La situation agricole dans des régions récemment libérées du département de la Somme. In: Comptes-Rendus des Séances de l'Académie d'Agriculture de France, 1917, 580-589.

HUBER, M.: La population de la France pendant la guerre. Paris 1931.

Journal des Régions Dévastées: Les moyens d'attendre et d'espérer. In: 25 May 1919(a).

- : Nouvelles des départements. In: 21 September 1919(b).
- : Département de la Somme. In: 29 June 1919(c).
- : L'initiative privée peut sauver les régions libérées. In: 21 March 1920.
- : L'avenir des coopératives. In: 27 February 1921(a).
- : Le recours aux Allemands. In: 6 November 1921(b).
- : Le coup de fouet. In: 20 November 1921(c).

MEISSEL, R. (Ed.): La Picardie dans la grande guerre. Amiens 1986.

MICHEL, E.: Les dommages de guerre et leur réparation. Paris 1932.

Ministère de l'Agriculture: Statistique agricole annuelle, 1910-1928. Paris 1911-1929.

- : Statistique agricole de la France: résultats généraux de l'enquête. Paris 1936.

Ministère de l'Intérieur: Dénombrement de la Population, 1911, Paris 1912.

- : Dénombrement de la Population, 1921. Paris 1922.
- : Dénombrement de la Population, 1926. Paris 1927.
- : Dénombrement de la Population, 1931. Paris 1932.

Ministère des Régions Libérées: L'œuvre de la reconstitution. Paris 1923.

Ministère des Travaux Publics: Service des Régions Libérées: La reconstitution de la France dévastée: statistique générale. Paris 1929.

Morain, A.: La situation économique du département au 1 août 1918. Amiens 1918.

- : L'œuvre de reconstitution de la région dévastée au 1 avril 1920. Amiens 1920.
- : La reconstitution de la région libérée au 1 avril 1921. Amiens 1921.
- : La reconstitution de la région libérée au 1 avril 1922. Amiens 1922(a).
- : Le remembrement de la propriété foncière dans la Somme. Amiens 1922(b).

Le Peuple: La CGT va exposer son plan de reconstruction. In: 20 March 1921(a).

- : La délégation ouvrière franco-allemande dans la zone rouge. In: 1 November 1921(b).

Peytral, P.: La reconstitution des régions libérées du Pas-de-Calais. Hénin-Liétard 1927.

Pierson, C., Desire, J.: Combats de 1914–1918 en Picardie, planche N5. In: Atlas de Picardie. Amiens 1985.

Pinchemel, P.: Structures sociales et dépopulation rurale de la plaine picarde de 1836 à 1936. Paris 1957.

Renaud, G.: Visite dans les régions dévastées. Epinal, 1917.

Rieucau, L.: Le remembrement rural dans le département de la Somme. In: Hommes et Terres du Nord, 1966-1, 87–97.

Thierry, M.: Dans la Picardie dévastée. Paris 1918.

Thomassin, M.: Situation agricole des régions libérées dans la zone de l'armée anglaise. In: Comptes-Rendus des Séances de l'Académie d'Agriculture de France, 1917, 624–628.

Archives

Archives Nationales (Paris) 324 AP/47 Agriculture dans la Somme, by M. Leroux, 13 mai 1931.

Archives Départementales de la Somme (Amiens) RL 332256 Rapports du préfet sur la reconstitution, 1 juin 1922.