

## 5.1. Agro-Food Chains in the First World War

Panel organiser: Langthaler, Ernst, Institute of Rural History, St. Pölten, Austria



The First World War marks the beginning of the 'short twentieth century' as the 'age of extremes' (Eric Hobsbawm). Though this European conflict is mainly seen as an industrial war, agricultural resources such as food were most decisive. Avner Offer's "The First World War. An Agrarian Interpretation" (1989) which adopts both international (with an emphasis on Britain and Germany) and inter-sectoral perspectives (production as well as consumption issues) provides a starting point for the current discussion on this topic. Accordingly, the session's aim is twofold: first, to overcome the divide between agricultural and food history by assessing the 'agro-food chain' from the locations of production to the locations of consumption; second, to overcome the 'methodological nationalism' by comparisons and connections between different country cases. The papers focus on food production, distribution and consumption, the associated regulatory mechanisms and the everyday experiences of food producers and consumers in selected regions and countries.

Chair: Langthaler, Ernst, Institute of Rural History, St. Pölten, Austria

Tuesday, 20 August 2013 // 1300 – 1500 // Session 5 – Room A-126

### 5.1.1. The Heroic Age of Food Control in Britain, 1917-18

Martin, John, De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

The strategic significance of agriculture in wartime was finally recognised by the government in 1917. Under the terms of the 1917 Corn Production Act the state guaranteed prices for the arable farmer as well as ensuring a minimum wage for farm workers. A corollary of this legislation was that for those who owned and occupied the land they were to act as 'trustees' of the nation. This programme of reform was widely hailed as a triumph in terms of the compact it established between agriculture and the nation. As a corollary to this the state intervened in the food distribution process to ensure a more equitable system. Despite the country's pre-war dependence on imported food these combined initiatives ensured that the British population was not forced to endure the food shortages and malnutrition which undermined the morale of many of the other combatants engulfed in what was the world's greatest military conflict. The aim of this paper is to reappraise the achievements of Britain's pioneering experiment in food control.



### 5.1.2. New Zealand and the United Kingdom's „Atlantic Orientation“ during World War One

Watson, James, Massey University, New Zealand

Avner Offer's 1989 book "The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation" describes how in the early years of the twentieth century British strategy for any future war with Germany came to rest on the combination of a naval blockade against Germany and the security of the United Kingdom's own seaborne food and raw material supplies. Offer termed the latter part of the strategy the 'Atlantic orientation'. This paper argues that due to a growing shortage of shipping during the First World War, Britain's importation of agricultural supplies indeed developed an 'Atlantic orientation', being drawn from the Americas rather than from the more distant Pacific dominions of Australasia. William Massey, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, was obliged to confess that, as regards his own country's contribution to the war effort, 'men were wanted more than supplies'. Focussing on New Zealand, the paper outlines the great difficulties this created both during and immediately after the war, and the tensions it created between the governments in Wellington and London.

### 5.1.3. Food Provisioning and Culinary Recommendations in Belgium during the First World War

Segers, Yves, Interfaculty Centre for Agrarian History, University of Leuven, Belgium

For the Belgian economy and the food situation the outbreak of the First World War had significant and dramatic consequences. For instance, more than 80% of the necessary bread wheat was imported at that time. The available food stocks shrank rapidly; food shortages and disorder threatened occupied Belgium. That is why a group of businessmen set up initiatives to organize food supply and established the Nationaal Hulp- en Voedingscomité (NHVC, National Support and Food Committee). For more than four years, the NHVC regulated and controlled the entire food chain, from production over processing and distribution to consumption. This paper wants to evaluate the role of the NHVC during the war. Firstly, we describe the main goals and the food policy of the NHVC, and its relation with the German occupier. Secondly, we analyse the food advises from the NHVC and particularly from its agricultural section. Housewives got recommendations how to prepare healthy and above all cheap meals with the available, but scarce foodstuffs. We analyse what kind of recommendations were given by the NHVC. Was there a difference between recommendations addressed towards town or country people, between housewives from lower and upper social classes? Moreover, we confront the official publications and guidelines of the NHVC with similar publications from doctors, food experts and women's organizations. Thirdly, we confront these food recommendations with daily practices. Using diaries and other personal documents we sketch a picture 'from below' of the daily food situation during wartime.

### 5.1.4. Famine in Lebanon: the Bloodiest Episode of the First World War

Pitts, Graham, Georgetown University, USA

Nearly a third of the Lebanese population starved to death during the First World War. My paper seeks to unlock the complex causal factors behind their tragedy by relying on a global and environmental framework in order to contribute to a larger agrarian interpretation of the war. While most work on the war focuses on the European theater, the Lebanese suffered more losses per capita than any other nation involved in the conflict. My research in Ottoman, Lebanese, French and U.S. archives will allow me to weigh the global diplomatic and environmental context of the famine. Correspondence between French and British diplomats strongly suggests that their respective administrations were content to let the famine worsen in order to blame 'the Turks' and gain political traction from the unpopularity of the Turks. In turn, the historical record has placed most of the blame on the Ottoman Administration, while the reality is significantly more nuanced. Enhanced propulsion of warships, driven by the intensive exploitation of fossil fuels by the ships steam engine underpinned the ability of the French and British navies to maintain a blockade of Lebanon's coast for more than three years. Such a complete blockade would have been impossible in the nineteenth century. This new, modern environmental reality also featured networks of provisioning that had grown long with global economic integration, leaving the Lebanese particularly vulnerable to any disruption in shipping networks.

#### Participants

##### Langthaler, Ernst

Ernst Langthaler has studied Economic and Social History at the University of Vienna (MA 1995, PhD 2000, Habilitation 2010). He was Visiting Professor at the Universities of Innsbruck and Vienna and is currently Director of the Institute of Rural History in St. Pölten and Secretary of the European Rural History Organisation (EURHO). His interests cover agricultural and food history since 1800, regional and global history since 1800 and historical-anthropological theory.

##### Martin, John

John Martin is Reader in Agrarian history at De Montfort University, Leicester. His main research interest is the impact of government policies on British agriculture and the countryside since the 1930s. His publications include "The Development of Modern Agriculture: British Farming Since 1931" (author, 2000) "The Encyclopaedia of British Rural Sports" (co-editor, 2004) and "The Frontline of Freedom" (co-editor, 2007). In his role of Research Associate, he contributed 54 articles to the "Oxford Dictionary of National Biography" (2004).

##### Pitts, Graham

Graham Pitts is a PhD Candidate in Georgetown University's History Department.

His dissertation project relies on research in Lebanese, Ottoman, British, French and American archives.

##### Segers, Yves

Yves Segers is professor of Rural History and director of the Interfaculty Centre for Agrarian History at the University of Leuven (Belgium) and professor of Economic History at Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussel (HUB). He published about agriculture, the countryside and food systems in Belgium and Europe since 1750.

##### Watson, James

James Watson is Associate Professor in History at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand. His research interests lie largely in examining aspects of the relationship between New Zealand and the United Kingdom. He has a particular interest in the drivers and effects of technological change. In 2005 he won an IgNobel Award ('for work that makes people laugh and then makes them think') for his article 'The Significance of Mr. Richard Buckley's Exploding Trousers: Reflections on an Aspect of Technological Change in New Zealand Farming between the World Wars', *Agricultural History*, 78:3 (2004), pp. 346-60.