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War, Agriculture, and Food: Rural Europe from the 1930s to the 1950s

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When comparing European agriculture in the early 1960s with that existing before the First World War, two principal differences are evident. Firstly, the productivity of agriculture in the 1960s was considerably higher, principally as the consequence of the intensive use of modern technologies such as modern machinery, fertilisers, pesticides or hybrid seeds. Secondly, agriculture in Western countries was characterised by deep-seated state intervention, in sharp contrast to the market mechanisms which guided the decision-making of economic agents prior to 1914. In the case of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, forming part of the Soviet bloc, public intervention was almost total, to the point at which in almost all of them private agriculture had either disappeared or was marginal. High productivity (thanks to technological progress) and far-reaching state intervention thus became the two fundamental characteristics of European agriculture in this period.

It seems obvious, therefore, that between 1914 and 1950 fundamental changes were produced in European

agriculture which, nevertheless, have received little attention from agricultural historians, in comparison with the interest aroused by the transformations of the 19th century or those after the Second World War. The period studied here is relatively ?obscure? in research terms, a black box within which a series of exogenous shocks profoundly affected agriculture. In general, it could be said that until now this period either has not been systematically researched by agricultural historians from a comparative perspective, or that these have preferred national studies, which on many occasions have not observed happenings in other countries.

The First World War, the Depression of the 1930s, the Second World War and the subsequent reconstruction constituted an accumulation of events which not only caused millions of Europeans to lose their lives, or suffer a severe deterioration in their levels of welfare, but also profoundly changed Continental society and its economy, and therefore the existence of its inhabitants. It is thus by no means strange that agriculture was also profoundly affected by all these factors.

Given this context, this book not only fills a historiographical vacuum, but also, principally, opens a door to systematic research from a European perspective of events in the agricultural sector between 1914 and 1955. Its principal merit is, therefore, to begin to provide us with a large number of answers to basic questions such as: What events were the principal drivers of these changes? What was the type of interventions which took place? How were the diverse interest groups confronted and articulated to produce different results? What elements were common and particular in agriculture in the different European countries during the transformation process? Yet the book not only provides us with contributions to construct answers to these questions, but also throws up new questions, and as such is an incentive for further research which aims to construct a common European rural history for the inter-war period. This is because the book emphasises that, although each national case was different, in all of them there are common elements which led to a European agriculture following a trajectory in which many elements were shared.

The book is structured in four parts (plus an introduction and some necessary conclusions), and uses well-defined themes, although some chapters in fact cover more than one of these.

The first part, ?The international perspective?, begins with a study by Giovanni Federico in which, from a European perspective, the effects of the Second World War on agricultural production are compared to those of the First World War. Although in the short run the fall in production was similar, from a long term perspective it is clear that after 1945 growth was considerably greater, as a consequence of the acceleration in growth in total factor productivity. In Federico?s opinion, this acceleration was linked to European agricultural policies of intervention, which began in the 1930s and intensified during the Second World War and the subsequent reconstruction, which concluded in the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The great questions of whether these policies have jointly been beneficial or otherwise are posed and some possible answers are suggested, although the author indicates that more research is necessary.

The second article, by Paul Brassley, evaluates the impact on agricultural trade of the Second World War. As expected, the war severely affected this trade, especially that of grains, which in the case of coarse grains fell by more than a half between 1939 and 1944. This decline in trade had important consequences for food consumption. The dangers of shortage were resolved in very different ways. In Great Britain, greater domestic production and dietary change maintained levels similar to those of the pre-war period. Germany was led to invade the Soviet Union, at least partly from the desire to have access to its food production and force, as with other occupied countries, obligatory exports for the consumption of the German population. Following the war, the United States became once more a considerable exporter of agricultural products, while the countries of Continental Europe pursued self-sufficiency in order to avoid being harmed in the future by unexpected falls in trade such as those occurring during the war.

The second part of the book, ?State regulation and agricultural policy?, concentrates on studying the impact of the change in agricultural policies and their transformation following the end of the war. John Martin and Ernst Langthaler tackle in their chapter the cases of Great Britain and German-annexed Austria. In both countries the differences were considerable, although as the authors stress, not so extreme as has been stated

hitherto. Great Britain may be considered to be a successful case in which state intervention, organised to ensure food supply during the war, permitted an increase of production in difficult times (especially regarding the import of inputs). By contrast, in Austria, exhaustive state control was unable to impede a certain fall in production, although it fomented technological change. In both cases it seems clear that the agricultural development of the post-war period was strongly influenced by the policies and systems of wartime intervention, as would be demonstrated by the British Agriculture Act of 1947.

In Spain, studied by Juan Pan-Montojo, the period 1935?55 marks the transition from a liberal to a regulated sector. What is interesting is that the first Francoist agricultural policy proved to be a complete failure, since production levels fell following the war and took almost 20 years, an unheard-of figure in Europe, to recover its pre-war level. These poor results are explained on the one hand by an exhaustive intervention in basic products, since fixing artificially low purchase prices by the state discouraged production or redirected it towards the black market. On the other, the fall in imports of fertilisers and other inputs (in some cases, such as working beasts, this was also due to their destruction during the Civil War) also caused falls in production. The agricultural policy followed by Franco?s dictatorship, which in the 1940s was strongly inspired by the example of Italian Fascism, interrupted the important agricultural transformations which had been occurring in Spain prior to the war. The magnitude of the problems faced by the country obliged the modification of the agricultural policies in the direction of promoting technological change at the beginning of the 1950s.

This part ends with a chapter by Zsuzsanna Varga, who describes how the Hungarian state had already begun to intervene in the agricultural sector in the 1930s, due to the problems caused by the Great Depression, with price subsidies for the principal products, regulation of the cultivation of others and links from 1931 to the German market, through the German-Hungarian trade agreement. The war, especially after 1941, posed serious problems for the Hungarian government, which had to balance rising external demands from Germany against increasing internal needs. Intervention became more intensive, although its results were meagre. This impelled even more exhaustive intervention, on occasions violent, which the German occupation considerably reinforced. The interesting element of the Hungarian case is that the intervention measures during the war years continued to be applied by Communist governments to ensure food supply. Obviously, collectivisation, developed from 1950 onwards, marked an important change in Hungarian agricultural policies, as state intervention became total regulation of the sector. The fall in production this produced led to the correction and softening of intervention after 1953 by the Nagy government. Paradoxically, the repression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 did not change the foregoing liberalising measures, but rather made Hungarian agriculture a rare economic sector in a communist country in which market forces acted, at least partially.

The third part of the book, ?The state-farmer relationship?, opens with a study by Mogens R. Nissen on the highly interesting, and doubtless also unique, case of Denmark. This is worthy of emphasis because agricultural intervention under the German occupation, succeeded, principally through the price system, in maintaining high levels of production in order to supply Germany with food, and sizeable profits for farmers. In this way, the profits accumulated during the war permitted significant modernising investments during the decade following the end of the war. Mechanisation and the rationalization of animal production were the principal beneficiaries of investment. War profits were not distributed uniformly among all farmers. Medium-sized farms gained more than other Danish farms.

The second chapter in this section, by Peter Moser and Tony Varley, displays a notable contrast between the methods, time periods and forms in which corporative strategies were developed in Ireland and Switzerland. In the Swiss case, the problems of food supply in the final years of the First World War generated a food and agricultural policy whose principal objective was the reorientation of agricultural production towards the domestic market and the food requirements of the population. The food security of the country became the principal objective of agricultural policy, and to achieve this agricultural modernisation was promoted. The development of this policy led to important interactions between the state, educational and scientific institutions, and actors in civil society, especially the Swiss Farmers? Union (SFU). The Irish case followed a very different path, since the government attempted to promote agricultural modernisation by bypassing,

and frequently conflicting with, agricultural organisations, which in contrast to Switzerland received no institutional recognition to participate in the establishment of agricultural policies until 1964. During the Second World War and the post-war period in Switzerland, the sacrifice of the autonomy of farmers to follow government directives and ensure food supply, was compensated for by policies which deliberately equalled farmers? income to that of qualified workers in rural areas.

The Swedish experience, analysed by Cariin Martin, also displays a trajectory in which public intervention, with corporative relationships which bring Switzerland to mind, was high from the early 1930s. In this case, it was once more the First World War, and government passivity faced with food problems, which produced an agreement in 1933 between the Social Democrats and the Agricultural Party when the Great Depression led to price falls. This agreement is considered to be one of the founding pillars of the Swedish welfare state and ensured guaranteed prices for milk, which would later be extended to other products. The policies established and the mechanisms of cooperation with agricultural organisations would be reinforced against the problems generated by the war. Control of foreign trade, food rationing and an attractive pricing policy, negotiated between state, farmers and consumers, which covered the costs of production and stimulated production, were the most important measures implemented. Last but not least, the aim of equal living conditions for farmers and comparable categories of labour began to be developed since 1941. The influence of the measures taken during the war on subsequent policy is evident, if we take into account that the new programme of agricultural policy approved by Parliament in 1947, and maintained in its fundamental principles until 1991, was based on the studies by an Agricultural Committee named in 1942, which presented its conclusions in 1946. This policy was based on two principles: improved farming productivity and improved general welfare. The two were connected, since the improvement in agricultural incomes was not merely based on higher prices, but also in greater efficiency.

The third part ends with a study in which Brian Short reviews the interactions during the war between the state and farmers in Great Britain, with special attention to the War Ags, local committees to which the central government delegated the implementation of its agricultural policies. The study underlines how farmers ?accustomed themselves? during the special circumstances of the war to state intervention, while at the same time technological and scientific advances played a decisive role in the improvement of production. The action of the War Ags thus became a precursor of the development of post-war agriculture, marked by higher productivity, guaranteed prices and higher incomes.

The final part of the book, ?Rural identities?, begins with the chapter by Gesine Gerhard, which deals with the marginal role of the Nazi years in the long process of agricultural change which Germany underwent from the end of the 19th century until 1955, when a modern agriculture with a small role in the economy as a whole was already consolidated. The war is seen as an interlude from change rather than the accelerator of it. Nazism, nevertheless, meant an important rupture in the crucial and highly extensive role which the state assumed in agriculture, through price fixing and market regulation. Post-war policies diverged between the two Germanys. In the East collectivisation began in 1952 and was completed in 1960. In West Germany, market and price regulation was established in 1950, but agricultural policy had its keystone in the approval in 1955 of the so-called Green Law, which was intended to ensure farmers equal participation in the economic recovery. As well as intervention in prices and incomes, the state fomented agricultural research and education and offered incentives to favour modernisation.

Clare Griffiths analyses the perception of farmers in the post-war years in Great Britain. Their enhanced reputation, with respect to 1939, was related to their role on the home front and their contribution to the war effort. In this way, the Agriculture Act of 1947 can be seen as a reward for previous efforts.

The same theme is approached by Edouard Lynch for France. In this case the conclusion is different, since, partly due to the Occupation, an agricultural consensus constructed in the Third Republic and blessed by the Vichy regime, was broken. The black market and food rationing, in addition to the perception that farmers were benefiting from the exceptional situation of wartime and the post-war period, generated increasing tension between town and country.

In short, the book underlines that the convergence of agricultural policies which the CAP achieved, from 1957 until the early 1990s, was clearly determined by the events of the inter-war period. Whether this influence was the First World War (Switzerland and Sweden), the Great Depression (Hungary, Sweden), fascist ideology (Spain) or the Second World War (the remaining countries), in all cases agricultural laissez-faire was buried in these years. The events described and the problems they caused, such as price instability, low incomes, reduced imports, fluctuations in supply or direct food insufficiency, led to a consensus in which the state played an important role in stabilising prices and markets and increasing farmers? incomes. This policy convergence made it easier for the CAP to be, in addition to a customs union, the first common policy of European Union countries, while countries such as Switzerland which have not joined it have not followed radically different policies.

There have also been notable differences. In general, policies of stimulation of production through guaranteed prices or interaction with research centres and universities have produced results which are much more interesting from the point of view of agricultural modernisation. The most ?democratic? policies, based on the establishment of consensuses around ?national objectives?, as in Switzerland, Sweden and Great Britain, also produced better results than authoritarian or repressive policies (Spain, Hungary, Germany and Austria). The paths taken were thus not identical but instead were profoundly conditioned by national circumstances.

In conclusion, this book tackles an interesting subject in an appropriate way, bringing together varied cases which help explain both the diversity and the common experience of European countries. It is to the credit of the editors that their selections, the questions they have posed to the authors, and their efforts to seek in the inter-war years the seeds of post-war policies, have produced a soundly structured book.

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