

World War I and the reconstruction of rural landscapes in Belgium and France: a historiographical essay*

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Abstract

This historiographical article assesses the ways in which (agricultural) historians have examined the reconstruction of rural landscapes in Belgium and France after the First World War. It reveals three axes of research, each of which emerged from the 1980s onwards. The first axis mainly focuses on the key actors of reconstruction. It is argued that a top-down perspective was gradually replaced by an emphasis on the agency of private organizations and the mentalities of the countrymen. A second set of publications examines the landscape itself. However, while in some articles the reconstructed landscape is approached as a material object, others put the constructed meanings of these landscapes to the fore. This emphasis on 'ways of seeing' is even more present in the third axis of research, which explores the regionalist rebuilding of farmsteads. As a conclusion, this article argues that through the broadening of chronological and geographical boundaries and by seeing the reconstruction process in a long-term and transnational perspective, this area of research can transcend its largely descriptive character.

The consequences of the First World War were almost as dramatic for the rural landscapes over which the war was fought as they were for the inhabitants of the war-torn countries.¹ This was particularly the case on the Western Front. A rapid German invasion through Belgium and northern France during the autumn of 1914 had, by the end of that year, been halted by Allied forces. When the frontline eventually stabilized, the plains of western Belgium and northern France served as the locale for four years of trench warfare. During this period, landscapes were reshaped beyond recognition. More than 3,430,000 ha of land was destroyed in Belgium and France alone. In France 4,926 towns and villages and 866,844 dwellings and farmsteads had to be (at least partially) rebuilt. The Belgian numbers are less impressive, but still 242 municipalities had witnessed destruction to some degree. Almost 100,000 public and private buildings had to be reconstructed, including some 24,000 farms.²

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¹ We use the concepts 'countryside' and 'rural landscape' interchangeably, referring to a physical entity that contrasts with townscapes and cityscapes.

Large numbers of people were displaced by military activity or had property damaged by military action: in French these were referred to as the *sinistrés*.

Given the enormous degree of destruction, it is no surprise that even while the war continued, French and Belgian policy makers, civil servants, academics and architects published booklets which dealt with the reconstruction of the so-called 'devastated regions'. They continued to do so over the next decade. These early writings had a national perspective, focusing mainly on the role of the government and specially established state services such as the Emergency Works Service (Office des Travaux de Première Urgence) in France or its Belgian counterpart, the Devastated Regions Service (Office des Régions Dévastées). The most powerful pressure groups used their own publicity channels to advertise their efforts. As a matter of course, these had a narrow thematic scope. The authors' primary purpose was to give an overview of the steps that had already been taken to recover the countryside.³ This wave of publications ceased when the reconstruction process was completed at the end of the 1920s.

It was only from the 1980s onwards that the subject of the reconstruction of landscapes devastated by the First World War was rediscovered, for most part in the slipstream of studies on urban reconstruction. This reflected a broader rehabilitation of the First World War as an object of study,⁴ and in particular a renewed appreciation of the war's impact on (European) agriculture. This revival was undoubtedly fostered by the approaching centenary, an awareness of the gradual loss of the generation who had fought in the war and the availability of new source material. In contrast with earlier publications on war and agriculture, perspectives had shifted towards social and cultural history. With regard to the rural economy and agriculture, emphasis was now placed on (female) farm labour, government policies on agricultural production, trade and food supply and the diffusion of new technologies.⁵ In a more qualitative and transnational vein, historians in recent years have contributed to our understanding how the scarcity of foodstuffs determined the specific survival strategies of soldiers and civilians

² By 'reconstruction' we mean the material recovery, whether identical or not, of buildings and other landscape elements during and after the First World War. The term reconstruction does not exclude modernization, rationalization and adaptation of pre-war real properties. H. Clout, 'Restoring the ruins: the social context of reconstruction in the countryside of northern France in the aftermath of the Great War', *Landscape Research* 21 (1996), pp. 214–5; id., *After the ruins: restoring the countryside in Northern France after the Great War* (1996), p. 280; G. Smets, 'Les régions dévastées', in E. Mahaim (ed.), *La Belgique restaurée. Etude sociologique* (1926), pp. 102–7 and 116–17; E. Leplae, *La restauration agricole des régions dévastées: son coût et ses exigences* (1920), pp. 12–13.

³ Some examples for Belgium are the *Rapport spécial sur le fonctionnement et les opérations de la section agricole du Comité National de Secours & d'Alimentation* (1920), *Onze werking in verwoest Vlaanderen: beknopt overzicht der werkzaamheden van onzen Dienst voor herstel van Westvlaanderen* (1921). For France, J. Brisac,

Rapport du préfet sur le fonctionnement des services de la reconstitution de la Marne (1923) and A. Naudin, *Département du Nord: trois ans de reconstitution* (1922).

⁴ J. Winter, 'Introduction', in J. Winter (ed.), *The legacy of the Great War: ninety years on* (2009), pp. 1–17.

⁵ Significant publications on these issues include P. Dewey, *British agriculture in the First World War* (1989); L. Margaret Barnett, *British food policy during the First World War* (1985); C. Gibson, 'The British Army, French farmers, and the war on the western front, 1914–1918', *Past and Present* 180 (2003), pp. 175–239; B. White, *The Women's Land Army in First World War Britain* (2014), H. Crowe, 'Keeping the wheels of the farm in motion: labour shortages in the Uplands during the Great War', *Rural Hist.*, 19 (2008), pp. 201–16; ead., 'Profitable ploughing of the Uplands? The food production campaign in the First World War', *AgHR*, 55 (2007), pp. 205–28, H. Smidt, 'Dutch and Danish agricultural exports during the First World War', *Scandinavian Economic Hist. Rev.* 44 (1996), pp. 140–60.

on both sides of the frontline.⁶ Some work has furthermore been done on the particular war experiences in rural areas.⁷

Unfortunately, the material recovery of the countryside has rarely been taken into account.⁸ The post-war reconstruction process was nevertheless an important episode in the modern history of European agriculture and, more generally, its countryside. After all, the recovery of agricultural land use and landscape structures and the rebuilding of farmsteads both reflected and determined broader socio-economic developments. However, it remains unclear to what extent farmers and countrymen adopted changes such as the mechanization of agriculture or new forms of rural architecture.⁹ The integration of the rural reconstruction after the First World War within the broader field of agricultural history can mutually enrich our understanding of the impact of short-term disturbances on longitudinal evolutions and the role of underlying socio-economic driving forces during the immediate aftermath of war.

The reconstruction of rural landscapes has largely remained outside the scope of rural historians. Instead, this void was partially filled by social historians, human geographers and architectural historians. While the research domain has certainly profited from this heterogeneity of academic backgrounds, providing a kaleidoscopic view of the subject, it simultaneously risks losing common ground. Firstly, the reconstruction of the rural landscape has been studied as an activity. Public and private organizations as well as the local countrymen were involved of the reshaping of the landscape, each actor having their specific approach and goals. Secondly, scholars have made the reconstructed landscapes their main object of study. Nonetheless they have acknowledged the subjectivity of the process by incorporating underlying human activities, interests or (less frequently) experiences. Architectural historians have done similar work on the reconstruction of farmsteads, although more attention has been paid to the meanings of the regionalist architecture that dominated on both sides of the Franco-Belgian border.

These three axes of study form the framework of this article. In the next paragraphs, I explore how scholars have examined, respectively, the role of some key actors, the recovery

⁶ I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, R. Duffett and A. Drouard (eds), *Food and war in twentieth-century Europe* (2011); R. Duffett, *The stomach for fighting: food and the soldiers of the Great War* (2012); B. Demasure and Y. Segers, 'Eten in oorlogstijd. Voedselaanbevelingen en keukentips in België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog', *Volkskunde. Tijdschrift over de cultuur van het dagelijkse leven* 114 (2013), pp. 257–78; M. Teich, 'Science and food during the Great War: Britain and Germany', in H. Kamminga and A. Cunningham (eds), *The science and culture of nutrition, 1840–1940* (1995), pp. 213–34.

⁷ B. Ziemann, *War experiences in rural Germany 1914–1923* (2007); B. White, 'Feeding the war effort: agricultural experiences in First World War Devon, 1914–17', *AgHR* 58 (2010), pp. 95–112.

⁸ Noteworthy exceptions are E. Köhler, 'Inflation and black marketeering in the Rhenish agricultural

economy, 1919–1922', *German Studies Rev.* 8 (1985), pp. 43–64; C. Lockwood, 'From soldier to peasant? The land settlement scheme of East Sussex, 1919–1939', *Albion* 30 (1998), pp. 439–62; P. Barral, 'Les conséquences de la Première Guerre mondiale dans l'agriculture française', *Francia* 2 (1974), pp. 551–65.

⁹ It has often been argued that the First World War had only minor effects on agriculture and the countryside in general, for example with regard to property ratios and rural migration. L. Van Molle, *Katholieken en Landbouw: Landbouwpolitiek in België, 1884–1914* (1989), pp. 347–9; Y. Segers, L. Van Molle and G. Vanpaemel, 'In de greep van de vooruitgang, 1880–1950', in Y. Segers and L. Van Molle (eds), *Leven van het Land: Boeren in België, 1750–2000* (2004), pp. 56–7; H. Byls, 'Rester catholique en France' (unpublished PhD thesis, KU Leuven, 2013), pp. 287–98.

of rural landscapes, and the rebuilding of farmsteads. In addition to this, I trace the parallels that exist between the broader historiography on agriculture and the First World War and the existing literature on the reconstruction of the countryside in Belgium and France. Following this, in the concluding section, I put forward some suggestions for further research.

I

The redevelopment of the devastated regions was the work of many hands. Already during the war, the French and Belgian governments were making preparations for the post-war recovery of these areas (see Map 1). The King Albert Fund (Fonds du Roi Albert I) was set up by the Belgian government as early as 1916 to provide temporary housing for returning refugees. The year before, the government in exile had issued a decree that had compelled the local authorities of devastated villages to develop layout plans and building regulations. These documents would then serve as the basis for post-war reconstruction.¹⁰ A similar law passed the French parliament in 1919. This was also the year that the French Sinistrés Charter and the Belgian law on war damage, which defined the right to war indemnities in both countries, came into effect. The flows between the legislative bodies of the two countries have yet to be studied.¹¹ Non-governmental organizations also played an important role in the reconstruction process. Local cooperatives defended the rights of the *sinistrés*, while farmers' unions did the same for the agricultural sector. Architects, contractors and building companies tried to capitalize on the temporary rise of building activities. Historians generally agree that the reconstruction of the rural landscape was interventionist in nature but the question of the degree to which state services controlled the recovery of the countryside remains open to debate.

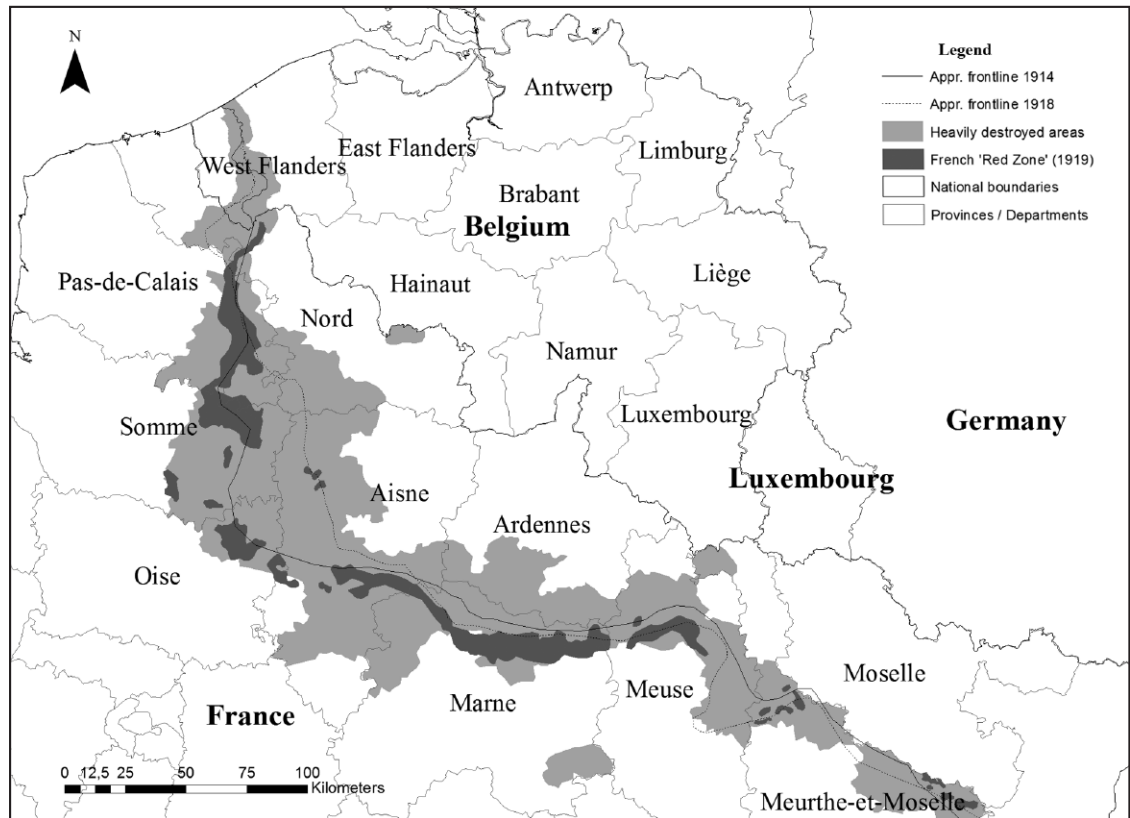
A first set of historical writings analysed the effect of government policy on the efficiency and effectiveness of the post-war reconstruction process. It is striking that this perspective looms large within the modest Belgian historiography on the subject. One possible explanation is the greater involvement of the Belgian Devastated Regions Service in erecting permanent housing. In one of the few Belgian writings devoted solely to the reconstruction of agriculture, Hortensius strongly emphasized the importance of state policy in three respects: taking care of the refugees, creating a system to provide compensation and restoring legislative power to the devastated municipalities.¹² As a consequence, attention is almost exclusively given to the Belgian government and the institutions that were responsible for the reconstruction of

¹⁰ K. Baert, 'Wonen in de verwoesting. Omstandigheden en getuigen', in J. Cornilly, S. De Caigny and K. Vandermarliere (eds), *Bouwen aan wederopbouw 1914/2050: architectuur in de Westhoek* (2009), p. 22; J. Cornilly and C. Vandewalle, 'Onzichtbare pleitbezorgers. Tussen bewoners en hogere overheden', in *Bouwen aan wederopbouw*, p. 54.

¹¹ In his thesis on war compensations in Belgium and France, Robert Debecker devoted one chapter to the compensation for First World War damage. He observed no significant differences between the two

countries. R. Debecker, *La réparation des dommages de guerre en France et en Belgique* (printed Ph.D thesis, University of Paris, 1950), pp. 57–65.

¹² L. Hortensius, 'Burgers, boeren: hun goed, hun vee. De frontstreek na 1914–1918' (unpublished MA dissertation, Ghent University, 1989). Except for his dissertation, few historical studies on the reconstruction of the countryside have been undertaken. Given the scarcity of Belgian publications on the subject, we have chosen to include this pioneering but unpublished work in our discussion.



MAP 1: Heavily devastated regions in Belgium and France (light grey), and France's 'red zone' (dark grey). It is self-evident that the areas along the frontlines witnessed most destruction.

Source: aggregated from Clout, *After the ruins*, pp. 26, 50 and L. Vandael *et al.*, 'The heritage of 'Flanders Fields': Research, protection, management and commemoration of World War I landscapes in Flanders (Belgium)', in K. Reeves *et al.* (eds), *Battlefield events: Landscape, commemoration and heritage* (2016), p. 98.

the countryside. Other actors, such as the *sinistrés* themselves, were particularly depicted as the passive victims of failed state policies. The King Albert Fund and the Belgian Minister of Interior, Jules Renkin, are both criticized for their inability to elaborate a satisfactory reconstruction policy.¹³

Shifting away from this top-down approach, much work deals with the discordant relations between state services and the *sinistrés*. Jean-Marie Baillieul, for example, does not have an eye only for the Belgian Devastated Regions Service or the Agricultural Recovery Office (Office de la Reconstitution Agricole), but also for the action of the inhabitants in Ypres and its surrounding villages. Through an exhaustive analysis of laws and decrees on the one hand, and regional journals on the other, Baillieul highlights the government's and *sinistrés*'

¹³ While the King Albert Fund did not manage to provide sufficient provisional housing for the returning population, Jules Renkin was blamed by Hortensius for his improvised policy which was both too expensive and discouraged private initiative. Hortensius, 'Burgers, boeren', pp. 95–8 and 121–5.

conflicting visions of war compensation. The reconstruction process was constantly being shaped and reshaped by new legislative initiatives and the mobilization of local inhabitants. Protest actions and lobbying were both used to adjust government policies to their advantage.¹⁴

For France, abundant and excellent research has been done by Hugh Clout. A professor of human geography, Clout was one of the first scholars to investigate the reconstruction practices of both the French government and the *sinistrés*, and a few private organizations. Nine articles examine the recovery process in different departments, with two publications having a broader geographical focus. This resulted in a book, *After the Ruins* (1996), which rests upon meticulous archival labour, and is still a standard work.¹⁵ For Clout, the hardships of reconstruction do not only have to be sought in government policies, but rather in the dialectical relationship between public and private initiatives. State organizations nevertheless remain the leading players, determining the chronological framework of the post-war reconstruction period. More specifically, he distinguishes a rupture between the first few years of emergency works (i.e. clearing and levelling of the land) and a recovery phase. During the emergency phase, which had already started during the war,¹⁶ most work was done by state agencies and voluntary groups. While the Emergency Works Service was responsible for the clearance of military equipment and the filling of trenches and shell holes, the Motorized Agriculture Service (Service de la Motoculture) undertook the preparation of land for cultivation. A third institution, the Agricultural Recovery Office (Office de Reconstitution Agricole), collected, repaired and distributed agricultural equipment. By the start of 1922, most work had been handed over to private initiative. This was the start of what Hugh Clout describes as the recovery phase. Since permanent reconstruction was no longer the responsibility of the emergency services, cooperatives now played a major role in the redevelopment of arable land and farmsteads. This was also the case with architects, contractors and workers, who were employed by cooperatives or individual landowners.¹⁷ This is not to say that the state was completely absent, since the

¹⁴ J. M. Baillieul, 'Recht op herstel? De Belgische regering staat op de rem bij het vergoeden van de geteisterden', in K. Baert, J. M. Baillieul, P. Chielens *et al.* (eds), *Ieper, de herrezen stad* (1999), pp. 21–66.

¹⁵ Hugh Clout has published discussions of the reconstruction of the countryside in several départements: 'Rural revival in the Pas-de-Calais after the Great War', in J. R. Pitte (ed.), *Géographie historique et culturelle de l'Europe* (1995), pp. 189–207; 'Reconstructing the countryside of the Eastern Somme after the Great War', *Erdkunde* 48 (1994), pp. 136–49; 'Rural revival: The recovery of Moselle after World War I', *Modern and Contemporary France* 2 (1994), pp. 395–403; 'War and recovery in the countryside of north-eastern France: the example of Meurthe-et-Moselle', *J. Historical Geography* 23 (1997), pp. 164–86; 'Rural reconstruction in Aisne after the Great War', *Rural Hist.*, 4 (1993), pp. 165–85; 'Devastation and reconstruction in the countryside of Nord département, 1914–1930', in J. P. Donnay *et al.* (eds), *Recherches de*

Géographie Humaine: hommage au professeur Charles Christians (1996), pp. 35–43; 'Rural reconstruction in Meuse after World War I', *Acta Geographica Lovaniensia* 28 (1992), pp. 599–607; 'Devastation and reconstruction in the countryside of Ardennes département', *Annales de Normandie* 46 (1996), pp. 381–98; 'Rural revival in Marne, 1914–1930', *AgHR* 42 (1994), pp. 140–55. A regional focus is used by him in 'The revival of rural Lorraine after the Great War', *Geografiska Annaler, Series B, Human Geography* 75 (1993), pp. 73–91; 'La reconstruction de la campagne au Nord de la France, 1918–1930', *Hérodote. Rev. de géographie et de géopolitique* 74–5 (1994), pp. 111–26; 'La reconstruction rurale en Picardie', in Anne Duménil and Phillippe Nivet (eds), *Reconstructions en Picardie après 1918* (2000), pp. 116–25.

¹⁶ Clout, 'Rural revival in the Pas-de-Calais', p. 203.

¹⁷ Clout, *After the ruins*, pp. 107–45 and 207–10 and Clout, 'Example of Meurthe-et-Moselle', pp. 173–7.

legal and financial framework for reconstruction was largely set up by the Sinistrés Charter and other national laws.¹⁸

This shift of the French state from being a direct actor to an indirect supervisor of the reconstruction is also present in Véziat's work on reconstruction in the Aisne department.¹⁹ Like Clout, Véziat takes a more positive view of the reconstruction than Baillieul and Hortensius. He states that some modernization ensued from post-war recovery, such as the expansion and amelioration of the electricity grid, the improvement of settlement patterns, land consolidation and the mechanization of agriculture. However, in the same breath he argues that modernization was often met by fierce opposition from local populations, who thwarted initiatives launched by state services. Successive governments therefore progressively loosened their grip on the reconstruction process.²⁰

Patrice Marcilloux seems to disagree with both Clout and Véziat on the changing nature of state interventionism. In his view, the reconstruction period was a decisive moment in the evolution towards a government more willing to intervene directly in the lives of its citizens. This was especially the case after 17 April 1919, when the French government worked out a legal framework for the *sinistrés*. Marcilloux looks at this 'swelling of the state' as a political answer to the organization of the *sinistrés* in cooperatives and the foundation of other private associations. In their search for power, politicians tried to hold on to their electorate through enacting laws that benefited the inhabitants of the devastated regions. In this sense, the post-war reconstruction laws were a precursor of the new social contract that took definitive shape after 1945.²¹ Bedhome supports this viewpoint in his doctoral dissertation on the reconstruction of the Chemin des Dames. Less wealthy *sinistrés* in particular had feelings of resentment, and Bedhome claims that a (weak) linear correlation existed between the amount of compensation paid to individuals and their position on the social ladder.²² To defend the interests of the latter, cooperatives were founded and formed a counterweight to the established regional elite, and eventually brought about a transformation of the pre-war social order.²³

Thousands of reconstruction cooperatives were thus established in France and Belgium to defend the interests of the local war victims. Cooperatives guided (non-wealthy) *sinistrés* through numerous formalities, collected demands for reconstruction, safeguarded members'

¹⁸ Clout regards this law as a compromise between the individualism of the *sinistrés* and the economic and financial capacities of the French government. Clout, *After the ruins*, p. 180.

¹⁹ E. Véziat, 'La reconstruction dans le département de l'Aisne après la Grande Guerre', *Fédération Des Sociétés d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de l'Aisne: Mémoires* 46 (2001), p. 179.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ P. Marcilloux, 'Le défi administratif: entre interventionnisme, contrôle et efficacité', in E. Bussi re, P. Marcilloux and D. Varaschin (eds), *La grande reconstruction. Reconstruire le Pas-de-Calais apr s la Grande Guerre* (2002), pp. 48–52.

²² S. Bedhome, 'Reconstruire le Chemin des Dames' (unpublished PhD thesis, Universit  Paul Val ry, Montpellier III, 2012), pp. 128–31. Bedhome sketches four possible explanations for the unequal distribution of reinvestment coefficients: the attribution date, the degree of devastation of the personal and real properties, the building type and the social status of the *sinistr s*. Since the first three variables had no effect, Bedhome concludes that social status was the only reasonable explanation for unequal coefficients. However, many other elements might play a part in these disparities: for instance the cost of building materials, the quality of the pre-war goods.

²³ Ibid., p. 257.

interests and so on.²⁴ Agricultural cooperatives defended the interests of the West Flemish farmers.²⁵ Unfortunately, no research has been conducted on the ideological or socio-economic backgrounds of the cooperatives' members. Clout investigates the unequal spread of cooperatives along the French frontline and adopts a structuralist explanatory model. He thereby reveals a dichotomy between the reconstruction process in Lorraine (and to a lesser extent Artois and French Flanders) and other regions in northern France. In the former regions, cooperatives were accepted more readily. Clout attributes this to socio-cultural contrasts based on religious observance, the decline of self-sufficient family farming, the subsequent market orientation of agriculture and the local influence of trade unions.²⁶ Philippe Delvit's exposition throws more light on the legal status of the cooperative societies. He draws the picture of them as vital organizations in the rebuilding of northern French villages, albeit they not always correctly represented their members.²⁷

In accordance with recent trends in First World War historiography, scholars have explored the experiences of the *sinistrés* returning to their devastated home ground. Bedhome calls this a *société ruine* that arose in reaction to the *événement ruine*: this society was composed of *sinistrés* as well as other (public or private) actors that interacted to rebuild the devastated French regions.²⁸ Refugees' letters articulated their desire to return to their home towns in northern France as quickly as possible. Once returned, feelings of despair and abandonment led to an almost revolutionary attitude among a good number of them.²⁹ Paradoxically, Lobry also emphasizes the courage of the French *sinistrés* who took matters into their own hands. They made a living for themselves amidst the ruins while awaiting permanent reconstruction.³⁰ Experiences of French and Belgian returnees were strikingly similar. Baert estimates the number of refugees (from the arrondissements of Ypres, Diksmuide and Veurne alone) as 150,000. In the course of 1919 and 1920, approximately 90,000 inhabitants returned, although it has to be remembered that many people from other parts of Belgium moved to the devastated regions to take over the farms of non-returning landholders. Like their French counterparts, the frustrated returnees did not wait for houses to be provided by the state and built their own shelters with whatever was to hand. They also started to clean, level and cultivate the surrounding land; permanent rebuilding, however, only got under way from 1920 onwards.³¹

It has become clear that during the reconstruction process, a complex network of interactions between private and public actors was both formed and transformed. Dominiek Dendooven gives an excellent synthesis of the rebuilding activities of state services, architects, local farmers and other organizations in western Belgium. He particularly stresses the importance of the Belgian Farmers' Union in the restoration of devastated farmlands.³² Sven Carnel employs

²⁴ Clout, *After the ruins*, pp. 209–10.

²⁵ Cornilly and Vandewalle, 'Onzichtbare pleitbezorgers', p. 66.

²⁶ Clout, 'Restoring the ruins'.

²⁷ P. Delvit, 'Les sociétés coopératives de reconstruction. Une lecture juridique?', in Bussière *et al.* (eds), *La grande reconstruction*, pp. 53–64.

²⁸ Bedhome, 'Reconstruire le Chemin des Dames', p. 390.

²⁹ P. Nivet, 'Le retour des réfugiés ou la violence des

ruines', in Duménil and Nivet (eds), *Reconstructions en Picardie*, pp. 22–33.

³⁰ G. Lobry, 'La vie au "provisoire"', in Duménil and Nivet (eds), *Reconstructions en Picardie*, pp. 34–48.

³¹ Baert, 'Wonen in de verwoesting', pp. 18 and 38; Hortensius, 'Burgers, boeren', p. 110.

³² D. Dendooven, 'De wederopbouw', in P. Chielens *et al.* (eds), *De laatste getuige: het oorlogslandschap van de Westhoek* (2006), pp. 97–102.

a microstudy to bring the complexity of post-war recovery into full play. In his case study on the reconstruction of Neuve-Eglise, a rural village just south of Ypres, Carnel approaches post-war reconstruction as a two-phase process. During the preparatory phase, that lasted from 1918 to 1921, Belgian state services held a hegemonic position. Carnel portrays the provisional housing policy of one of these services, the King Albert Fund, merely as patchwork. Permanent reconstruction was carried out or influenced by an array of governmental and non-governmental actors, who were often in conflict with each other. Political instability during the early 1920s and the fact that Belgium, in contrast with France, did not have a Ministry of Devastated Regions, did not encourage a quick recovery of the countryside. Various reconstruction programmes existed simultaneously, both for rebuilding activities as well as the recultivation of farmland. State services failed to provide provisional shelters or to steer permanent housing in the right direction, because of an underestimate of the financial and organizational costs as well as the agency of the *sinistrés*. The war damage tribunals (tribunaux des dommages de guerre) were inadequately staffed to deal with the thousands of compensation requests. Other actors, such as the reconstruction cooperatives, architects and contractors rarely maintained cordial relations.³³

The availability of new historical sources,³⁴ together with a growing emphasis on individual agency, has inspired historians to investigate previously forgotten actors. The role of mayors and other municipal and provincial representatives, for example, is one of the aspects of the reconstruction process that has remained somewhat unclear. In the Belgian edited volume *Bouwen aan wederopbouw*, Cornilly and Vandewalle make a praiseworthy attempt to lift the local authorities out of their obscurity. The fact is that after the Armistice, municipal (and provincial) powers were curtailed by the introduction of the Devastated Regions Service. For most of the affected villages, financial and organizational costs were too high to execute reconstruction works themselves. Between 1922 and 1925, most municipalities and the province of West Flanders had the full range of responsibilities restored to them, including the restoration of public buildings. The authors conclude that mayors were strictly controlled by the national government, but nevertheless played an important role as contact persons for the *sinistrés*.³⁵ Guislin examines the way in which French representatives and dignitaries fulfilled their functions as mediators between the state and the *sinistrés*. Mayors, councillors of the devastated arrondissements and parliamentarians employed various means to serve the devastated regions. Cooperation between local representatives on horizontal and vertical scales was usual. Conservatives and leftists also used the parliamentary majority to impose their demands. According to Guislin, electoral results show the success of local representatives in defending the rights of the *sinistrés*. This is true for both right and left wing politicians, although they each had a different ideological view of the reconstruction process.³⁶

³³ S. Carnel, *La reconstruction des régions dévastées après la Première Guerre mondiale: le cas de Neuve-Eglise* (2002).

³⁴ The archives of the Federation for Reconstruction Cooperatives, historical sources of local authorities or digitized historical journals to name only a few.

³⁵ Cornilly and Vandewalle, 'Onzichtbare pleitbezorgers', p. 73.

³⁶ While left-wingers preferred an equal and just distribution of compensations and therefore state interventionism, right-wing politicians stressed the individualist character of the Sinistrés Charter and defended the rights of private property. J. M. Guislin, 'Édiles et notabilités face à la reconstruction (1919–1927)', in Bussière et al. (eds), *La grande reconstruction*, pp. 77–96.

Civil society organizations too tried to gain influence by participating actively in the recovery of the countryside. The Belgian Farmers' Union is a textbook example here. Both from a humanitarian and an expansionist perspective, the Catholic pressure group set up the Service for the recovery of West Flanders (Service pour la Restauration de la Flandre occidentale). This organization advised local farmers and helped to restore farmsteads and arable lands. They gave cash advances to members and even had their own building service.³⁷ How successful this strategy was in attracting new members has yet to be discovered. The fact that many local branches were established in West Flanders shortly after 1918, is an indication of the Farmers' Union's growing influence. The remarkable growth of the French Union of Agricultural Syndicates of the Aisne (Union des Syndicats Agricoles de l'Aisne) during the early 1920s can also be explained by its participation in post-war reconstruction activities.³⁸ Especially in the regions where large agricultural enterprises were found, new cantonal syndicates were established. Their aims were very similar to those of the Farmers' Union, but the Union des Syndicats did not distribute advances nor intervene directly in the rebuilding of farmsteads. According to Marival, through protest actions and lobbying they succeeded in diminishing state interventionism.

The Belgian National Commission for the Embellishment of Rural Life (Commission Nationale pour l'Embellissement de la Vie Rurale) attempted to convince its clients of its traditionalist building principles. Like the Central Society for Belgian Architecture (Société Centrale d'Architecture de Belgique), the Commission pleaded for the use of modern construction methods and sanitary provision, but within a traditional exterior. This echoed a preference for a regionalist architecture, a style that integrated concerns for modern comfort and hygiene with a traditional formal language. Reconstructed farmsteads had to reflect a 'genius loci' through the use of local building materials and stylistic elements.³⁹ But unlike the previous interest groups, the organization seems to have had little impact on post-war rebuilding activities.⁴⁰

Due to the local conservatism and the political reluctance to force through far-reaching land reallocations, only three Belgian villages were not straitjacketed in their pre-war settlement pattern.⁴¹ Moreover, since the rebuilding of dwellings and farmsteads was left to the proprietors' discretion, architects and planners were generally overlooked and even distrusted by some sections of the rural population of West Flanders. Architects quarrelled amongst themselves about supposed favouritism and the monopolization of commissions. Few managed to make a name for themselves during the immediate aftermath of the war.⁴² Cappronnier comes to the same conclusions for France. According to him, this was a result of the weak institutionalization and appreciation of the architectural profession.⁴³

³⁷ L. Van Molle, *Ieder voor allen. De Belgische Boerenbond, 1890–1990* (1990), pp. 152–6.

³⁸ G. Marival, 'Reconstruction et Syndicalisme Dans l'Aisne', in Duménil and Nivet (eds), *Reconstructions en Picardie*, pp. 126–37.

³⁹ B. Notteboom, "'Ouvrons Les Yeux!'" Stedenbouw en beeldvorming van het landschap in België, 1890–1940' (unpublished PhD thesis, Ghent University, 2009), pp. 367–89.

⁴⁰ S. De Caigny, 'Tussen filantropie en macht. In de bres voor de belangen van de achterban', in Cornilly

et al. (eds), *Bouwen aan wederopbouw*, pp. 162–7.

⁴¹ D. Dendooven, 'Het terrein effenen. Aanleg, infrastructuur en landbeheer', in Cornilly et al. (eds), *Bouwen aan wederopbouw*, pp. 86–9.

⁴² J. Cornilly, 'Gevraagd: architecten. Kiezen tussen alternatieven', in Cornilly et al. (eds), *Bouwen aan wederopbouw*, pp. 115–41.

⁴³ J. C. Cappronnier, 'Penser la reconstruction en 1917', in Duménil and Nivet (eds), *Reconstructions en Picardie*, p. 65.

The recovery of the former battlefields was partly undertaken by domestic and foreign non-profit organizations. During the war, charitable organizations had been established to help displaced French and Belgian citizens. A well-known example is the American Committee for Devastated France (Comité Américain pour les Régions Dévastées), headed by the wealthy philanthropist Anne Morgan and operating under patronage of the Ministry for Liberated Regions. Dopffer analyses the objectives and activities of this organization. First, the Committee devoted itself to the moral and social reconstruction of a handful of villages in Aisne, organizing feasts and opening refugee centres and small libraries.⁴⁴ But more importantly, the Committee distributed agricultural equipment, seeds for sowing and cattle to French farmers. After the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line, more than 3000 ha were brought back into cultivation as the Committee was assisted by agricultural cooperatives and military services. Once the war was over, 10,000 ha in the cantons of Vic-sur-Aisne, Coucy-le-Château, Anizy-le-Château and Soissons were farmed with the help of German prisoners of war.⁴⁵ Additionally, the organization promoted the economic reconstruction of 77 villages in Aisne by training tractor drivers and supporting agricultural syndicates.⁴⁶ The extent to which international charitable organizations were involved in the Belgian post-war recovery of the countryside has not yet been investigated in depth.⁴⁷

II

Within a decade of the end of the war, most of the former front zone had been recovered: roads and rivers had been reconstructed, forests replanted, farmland brought back into cultivation. The exception was the 'red zone' in France. These were the areas where the cost of land reclamation exceeded its economic value and hence afforestation was preferred. Because of fierce opposition from local landowners, the red zone shrank from 178,511 ha in 1918 to 48,820 ha ten years later.⁴⁸ In the Meuse department alone, 13,404 ha were to be afforested. In Belgium, the state did not opt for afforestation. Under pressure from the local population, pre-war rural landscapes were restored to their former state during the post-war emergency phase.⁴⁹ Land reallocations were rarely carried out. Although land consolidation was encouraged by the French government, only 120,050 ha had been reallocated by 1929.⁵⁰ French farmers preferred a quick recovery of agricultural lands: in 1928 90 per cent of the pre-war arable land was again in use. Roads and villages had largely been rebuilt by 1930, mostly reflecting their pre-war pattern.⁵¹ Neither in France nor in Belgium did the First World War bring about a

⁴⁴ A. Dopffer, 'Le Comité Américain pour les Régions Dévastées', in Duménil and Nivet (eds), *Reconstructions en Picardie*, pp. 70–86.

⁴⁵ J. P. Laurant, 'Anne Morgan et le Comité Américain des Régions Dévastées (1917–1923)', in R. Cazals, E. Picard and D. Rolland (eds), *La Grande Guerre: pratiques et expériences* (2005), pp. 377–9.

⁴⁶ Clout, *After the ruins*, p. 84.

⁴⁷ A short article on the activities of the *Oeuvre Suisse Belge* has been written by D. Nuytten, 'Het Oeuvre Suisse Belge en de heropbouw van landelijke

woningen en hoeves tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog in de streek van Zemst', *Land in zicht. Koninklijke vereniging voor natuur- en stedenschoon* 76 (2007), pp. 10–15.

⁴⁸ Clout, *After the ruins*, pp. 261–2.

⁴⁹ Except for two patches of woodland in the Belgian villages of Zonnebeke and Houthulst. For further information: Cornilly and Vandewalle, 'Onzichtbare pleitbezorgers', pp. 101–6.

⁵⁰ Clout, *After the ruins*, pp. 249 and 261–2.

⁵¹ This corresponds to 3,228,000 ha of farmland. Clout, *After the ruins*, pp. 280–1 and 287.

radical rationalization of rural landscapes. But some new elements, such as barbed wire (which replaced hedgerows) changed the appearance of the countryside.⁵²

Roads were vital for the transport of food and building materials and therefore repaired with urgency. Military roads and narrow-gauge railways were soon applied to civil purposes.⁵³ The reconstruction of the road system has only been studied in depth for the Pas-de-Calais department. Berthonnet's contribution stands midway between historical geography and business history. Besides the qualitative study of enterprises that specialized in road works, he gives attention to the reconstruction of national, main and local roads and structural works. What human, financial and industrial capital was invested? Do we speak about reconstitution or modernization? As soon as the war was over, the French Ministry of Public Works began to reinstate the entire road network of the Pas-de-Calais at the expense of the National Treasury. More than three-quarters of the national roads, two-thirds of main roads and half of local roads had suffered damage; 355 bridges had to be repaired. Wartime destruction did not prompt any alteration of the pre-war road pattern. During the early 1920s, reconstruction was delayed because of a shortage of manpower and raw materials. This led to an inflation in prices: construction costs sextupled between 1914 and 1927. Scarcity of money hindered the mechanization of building activities. On the other hand, the increasing specialization of *construction companies* and the emergence of motorized traffic stimulated the development of new techniques and surfaces capable of supporting modern vehicles.⁵⁴

Some historians and geographers have been interested in the recovery of arable land and pastures. In West Flanders alone some 100,000 ha of arable land had to be brought back into cultivation, at an estimated cost of 1.4 billion Belgian francs.⁵⁵ In France, the Ministry of Liberated Regions estimated that 3.5 million hectares of farmland had suffered wartime damage.⁵⁶ It is tentatively concluded that the recovery of land for renewed cultivation was the result of an interplay between state services and the *sinistrés*, as was the case for other reconstruction works. Carnel describes how Belgian state services coordinated the restoration of the rural economy directly as well as indirectly. The latter was done by granting premiums and organizing contests to repair farmland or construct (temporary) farm buildings. Local agriculturalists came together in farmers' guilds to take part in these competitions, which in their turn organized themselves into the Agricultural Federation of Devastated Flanders (Fédération agricole de la Flandre dévastée). Carnel argues that the Belgian Ministry of Agriculture saw the *sinistrés* as entrepreneurs, contracting them to recover their own lands. The Belgian government, however, provided for the possibility of the land being temporarily handed over to the State, which would then undertake the reclamation, but this course was

⁵² Cornilly and Vandewalle, 'Onzichtbare pleitbezorgers', pp. 101–2.

⁵³ Dendooven, 'Het terrein effenen', pp. 94–7. For an introduction on the activities of contractors and building enterprises in Belgium: I. Bertels, 'De uitvoerders op het terrein. Een braakliggend onderzoeksdomein', in Cornilly *et al.* (eds), *Bouwen aan wederopbouw*, pp. 175–91.

⁵⁴ A. Berthonnet, 'La reconstruction du réseau routier (1919–1927)', in Bussière *et al.* (eds), *La grande*

reconstruction, p. 141.

⁵⁵ This is approximately 5% of Belgian GNP at market prices in 1920. S. Carnel, 'La reconstruction agricole dans les régions dévastées', *Memoire de la société d'histoire de Comines-Warneton et de la région* 38 (2008), pp. 257–8; E. Buyst, 'New GNP estimates for the Belgian economy during the interwar period', *Rev. of Income and Wealth* 43 (1997), pp. 357–75.

⁵⁶ Clout, *After the ruins*, p. 160.

rarely followed.⁵⁷ In France, three state services were established to restore the devastated regions. While the Emergency Works Service cleared up and levelled the former battle zone, the Motorized Agriculture Service and the Agricultural Recovery Office were involved in reclamation and cultivation activities.⁵⁸ In both countries, these preparatory works had mostly been completed by the end of 1921.

In 1919, the Service for the Reconstitution of Landed Property (Service de la Reconstitution Foncière) was established in France to promote and execute land consolidation. Clout states that local farmers irrationally eschewed reallocation, so only 441 consolidation schemes had been agreed by 1929, two-fifths of them in the Somme.⁵⁹ His findings were later confirmed by Professor Gilbert Noël and five of his students at Artois University. Unfortunately, their writings lack the comparative or theoretical background that would have given more insight into the abundant qualitative and quantitative information. In their studies on the agricultural reconstruction of Pas-de-Calais, they stress the resistance of the local proprietors to the reallocation of fragmented farmlands. The conservative attitude and the emotional attachment of small farmers to their ancestral farmlands are cited as the main reasons for the survival of the old field and landscape structures.⁶⁰ Moreover, some farmers feared that their newly allocated lands would be of inferior quality. Lacking a long-term vision, they preferred to reconstruct their holdings in their pre-war form.⁶¹ So in the post-war years, state services did not succeed in improving the layout of the many small farms. Only nine municipalities in the Pas-de-Calais had opted for a partial or full reallocation by 1922; three others expected to undergo *remembrement* the following year. In total, land reallocation occurred in only thirteen municipalities and covered just 2,750 ha. According to Trupin, the reconstitution served the needs of nineteenth-century agriculture, a time when small and medium-sized farms dominated the regional rural economy.⁶²

The reconstruction of arable land continued the pre-war trend away from cereal production towards dairying.⁶³ In his master's thesis on the agricultural reconstruction of Cambrin, Kukula argues that as early as 1922, cereal production had attained pre-war levels.⁶⁴ This corresponds with Clout's more general statement that the area under arable cultivation peaked that year before decreasing slightly over the 1920s.⁶⁵ Research for other cantons confirms his assessment.⁶⁶

⁵⁷ Cernel, 'La reconstruction agricole dans les régions dévastées'.

⁵⁸ G. Noël, 'La restauration des structures agricoles. Priorité à l'exploitation du terroir et à l'équipement', in Bussière *et al.* (eds), *La grande reconstruction*, pp. 162–7.

⁵⁹ Clout, *After the ruins*, pp. 249–59. The 441 consolidation schemes covered the same number of villages and a total of 120,050 ha.

⁶⁰ Noël, 'La restauration des structures agricoles', pp. 174–7.

⁶¹ E. Pruvost, 'La reconstruction agricole dans le canton de Vimy après la Première Guerre mondiale' (unpublished MA dissertation, Université d'Artois, 1999), pp. 94–5; Noël, 'La restauration des structures agricoles', p. 174.

⁶² S. Trupin, 'La reconstruction agricole du canton de Bapaume de 1919 à 1929' (unpublished MA dissertation, Université d'Artois, 1999), p. 160.

⁶³ Clout, *After the ruins*, p. 281.

⁶⁴ F. Kukula, 'La reconstruction de l'espace agricole dans le canton de Cambrin au lendemain de la Première Guerre mondiale' (unpublished MA dissertation, Université d'Artois, 1999), p. 119.

⁶⁵ Clout, *After the ruins*, p. 281.

⁶⁶ Trupin, 'La reconstruction agricole du canton de Bapaume de 1919 à 1929'; Pruvost, 'La reconstruction agricole'; P. Carpentier, 'La reconstitution agricole des champs de bataille de l'Artois (1915)' (unpublished MA dissertation, Université d'Artois, 2000).

In the immediate aftermath of the war, in the absence of a working transport and commercial system, local food supply was indeed vital. Most crops had achieved pre-war levels of production by 1925. This was the case with sugar and fodder beets, and potatoes. Vegetables like beans, (green) peas and lentils increased in popularity. The area of industrial crops like tobacco and flax shrank after the First World War. The area under pasture increased during the 1912–28 period, but the recovery of livestock numbers proved to be difficult to achieve.⁶⁷ The dissertations unanimously show that the post-war reconstruction of arable land and pastures continued trends that had started before 1914. The tentative mechanization and rationalization of northern French agriculture was, according to Noël, not a consequence of the desire of farmers to modernize, but an answer to the shortage of manpower and the (alleged) need for a rapid reconstruction.⁶⁸

Surprisingly, little research has paid attention to the restoration of other landscape elements. Were drainage systems modernized? Were farmsteads banned outside the village centres? Did the spread of barbed wire as a fence material signify the end of hedgerows as an integral part of the rural landscape? Steven Heyde gives us a clue with regard to this last question. His research applies to the *bocage* landscape of the Ypres region. The south-western part of West Flanders was particularly woody on the eve of the First World War: spinneys, orchards and trees and hedgerows defined the landscape's image.⁶⁹ Heyde's detailed examination of hedgerow and tree networks on the domains of the noble family De Gheus d'Elzenwalle suggests the deliberate recreation of the pre-war landscape. Coppice with standards, orchards and pollard trees were mostly replanted as before. But some subtle changes were implemented. Elms were replanted to a larger extent than before the First World War, replacing other varieties such as ash.⁷⁰ Barbed wire was preferred to hedgerows as a fence material. Heyde points to the legal principle of 'reinvestment', which took the pre-war value of goods as the basis for compensation, as one of the main reasons for the continued existence of linear landscape elements.⁷¹

Heavy bombardment and explosions had reshaped the landscape of the battle zones in France and Belgium beyond recognition. While in densely populated Flanders a state-led afforestation scheme was never seriously considered, the French Agricultural Engineering Corps was ordered to define the red zone.⁷² Despite several revisions during the 1920s, the greening of the red zone in Northern France led to an increase of its forested area by 11,527 hectares.⁷³ The question of the underlying dynamics of afforestation occupies centre stage in publications on the red zone. Amat adopts the concept of *syvsystems* – forest ecosystems adapted and administered by humans, for civilian as well as military purposes – for his

⁶⁷ Kukula, 'La Reconstruction de l'espace agricole', p. 124.

⁶⁸ Noël, 'La restauration des structures agricoles', p. 177.

⁶⁹ S. Heyde, 'Het herstel van het bocagelandschap in de Zuidelijke Westhoek na de Eerste Wereldoorlog', *M&L. Monumenten, Landschappen en Archeologie* 33 (2014), pp. 28–9. A similar contribution is L. Stubbe, 'Een lappendeken met groene naden: het landschap van de Ieperboog anno 1914', in Chielens *et al.* (eds), *De*

laatste getuige, pp. 147–52.

⁷⁰ Except for 1923–4, when an elm disease caused a temporary shift towards poplars or oaks.

⁷¹ Heyde, 'Het herstel van het bocagelandschap', p. 38.

⁷² Clout, *After the ruins*, pp. 23–5.

⁷³ J. P. Amat, 'Nettoyer, restaurer, réaffecter le champ de bataille: la zone rouge', *Finir la guerre. Les cahiers de la paix* 7 (2000), p. 130.

biogeographical analysis of the afforestation of the front region. His work underlines the limits of the human capacity to shape the post-war landscape, since the natural dynamism of pioneering vegetal groups preceded the afforestation work of the Ministry of Liberated Regions. Amat's research consequently fits in with a growing academic interest in the resilience of landscapes and social-ecological systems.⁷⁴ The forests around Verdun, for example, were influenced by legal, economic and biogeographical factors. These elements created three complementary sylvosystems. The silvicultural sylvosystem responded to existing social and economic needs, while a military sylvosystem administered by the French military was mainly aimed at the protection of the French borders. A polemological sylvosystem developed after 1918 by an interplay between natural dynamics and the human redevelopment of the devastated regions.⁷⁵ Amat contends that not only demographic evolutions, but natural forces as well, influenced the delimitation of the polemological sylvosystem. This brought about a dual redevelopment of the red zone, whereby some 4000 ha in Meuse were restored and eventually resold by the state while 14,000 ha was afforested by the Waters and Forests Service (Administration des Eaux et Forêts).⁷⁶ Land pressure was higher in Pas-de-Calais, and here the red zone shrunk drastically from 26,409 ha in 1919 to 484 ha in 1927. A total of 200 ha was eventually reforested; other lands were brought back into cultivation or were ceded to the Canadian government to become sites of memory.⁷⁷

The supply of wood for military purposes jeopardized national wood resources. In France, an estimated 36.2 million cubic metres of timber and firewood were sawn during the First World War. According to Puyo, overexploitation in German-occupied areas ravaged some 350,000 ha of wooded surface.⁷⁸ In Belgium, almost 11,500 ha of public forest were destructively exploited by the German occupier, whereas 10,500 ha of private woods were deforested or destroyed during the war years.⁷⁹ Approximately one million solid metres of cut wood was registered by the Reparation Commission.⁸⁰ Public forests had recovered almost completely by 1927. This cannot be said for the private forests, which never reached their pre-war levels. Delays in paying compensation are certainly a part of the explanation for this.

The Belgian historian Pierre-Alain Tallier has suggested that the country's successful territorial claims on the woody Eupen-Malmedy region were, among other things, founded

⁷⁴ Some examples on the resilience of landscapes after disturbances of war (especially the First World War) are J. Hupy and R. Schaetzel, 'Soil development on the WWI battlefield of Verdun, France', *Geoderma*, 145 (2008), pp. 37–49; T. Bausinger, 'Exposure assessment of a burning ground for chemical ammunition on the Great War battlefields of Verdun', *Science of the Total Environment* 382 (2007), pp. 259–71. A recent study on the relationship between the environment and war is C. Pearson, *Mobilizing Nature: The environmental history of war and militarization in modern France* (2012).

⁷⁵ J. P. Amat, 'Guerre et milieux naturels: Les forêts meurtries de l'Est de la France, 70 ans après Verdun', *Espace Géographique* 16 (1987), pp. 220–33.

⁷⁶ Amat, 'La zone rouge', pp. 115–21.

⁷⁷ J. P. Amat, 'Bois et forêts du champ de bataille Arrageois: une reconstitution entre anonymat et gloire', in Bussière et al. (eds), *La grande reconstruction*, pp. 149–53.

⁷⁸ Puyo notifies that these numbers might not be accurate (i.e. exaggerated) within the context of the Versailles negotiations. J. Y. Puyo, 'Les conséquences de la Première Guerre mondiale pour les forêts et les forestiers français', *Rev. Forestière Française* 56 (2004), pp. 577–9.

⁷⁹ P. A. Tallier, 'La reconstruction du patrimoine forestier belge après 1918', in A. Corvol and J. P. Amat (eds), *Forêt et guerre* (1994), p. 218.

⁸⁰ The Belgian Reparation Commission investigated the amount and the method of payment of war indemnities by Germany.

on the wish to restore the national forest patrimony.⁸¹ Other scholars have incorporated the symbolic meanings of the replanted forests in their research. Following Pierre Nora's seminal work on French *lieux de mémoire*, historians have been interested in the (socially constructed) meanings of the forests of the red zone. In this literature, human agency predominates over biological or demographic factors. Conflicting visions of the permanence of the red zone were key in its delimitation and ultimately for the perception of the post-war rural landscapes. While the Ministry of Liberated Regions opted to abandon agriculture permanently in the red zone for financial reasons, farmers wanted to revise the arbitrary character of the delimitation. In opposition to the patrimonial discourse developed by certain cantonal councillors, farmers and local representatives managed to scale down the red zone of the Chemin des Dames in the course of the 1920s. In the end, only 574 ha were transferred to the Waters and Forests Service to be integrated in the national forest of Vauclerc. In contrast with the situation in Meuse, the forests of Aisne indeed did not become places of remembrance.⁸² This was partly due to the negative image of the Chemin des Dames as a place of mutiny.⁸³ Buridant and Marival also attribute the unsuccessful rehabilitation of Aisne's red zone as a site of memory to the wish of the local population to erase the traces of the First World War. In their blind obsession for reconstruction, farmers trivialized the former battlefield, whereas afforestation similarly played a part in the occultation of memory. Paradoxically the woodlands in Aisne are now hailed as preservers of the physical remnants of the First World War, quite the opposite of their original purpose.⁸⁴

III

The destruction brought by the First World War provided a unique opportunity for architects and planners to construct model towns and farmsteads. Architectural historians have been interested in these reconstruction activities since the 1980s. This might be explained as an aspect of the general revival of First World War studies but the Belgian architect Marcel Smets has also pointed out how the decline of modernism as the dominant building style from the 1980s allowed a new appreciation of regionalist architecture.⁸⁵ Regionalism was no longer seen as a backward architectural style, but as an ingenious combination of a traditional formal language and subtle modernizations. At the same time, postmodernism deconstructed (regionalist) architecture as a social construction. In the edited volume *Resurgam*, Bekaert notes that postmodern critics writing on modernism paralleled regionalism's negation of modernist architecture some sixty years earlier. Both approaches repudiate architecture's

⁸¹ Tallier, 'La reconstruction', pp. 221–3.

⁸² G. Marival, 'Agriculteurs et élus locaux contre la zone rouge (1919–1929). La première bataille de l'après-guerre sur le Chemin des Dames', in Cazals et al (ed.), *La Grande Guerre*, pp. 383–92.

⁸³ J. Buridant, 'Effacer la guerre: la reconstitution forestière de la zone rouge', in J. Buridant (ed.), *Forêt carrefour, forêt frontière: la forêt dans l'Aisne* (2005), p. 162.

⁸⁴ Marival, 'Agriculteurs et élus locaux', pp. 390–1; Buridant, 'Effacer la guerre', pp. 162–3. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Gerd Krumeich have produced a book on the ruins and 'bombscapes' of World War I: S. Audoin-Rouzeau and G. Krumeich, *Cicatrices: La Grande Guerre Aujourd'hui* (2008).

⁸⁵ M. Smets, 'Inleiding. De wederopbouw als onderzoeksgave', in M. Smets (ed.), *Resurgam. De Belgische wederopbouw na 1914* (1985), p. 10.

self-proclaimed ability to construct a new society without considering the past. Instead, history is looked on as a toolbox, which contains all the tools necessary to reconstruct towns and cities.⁸⁶ During the interwar years, this toolbox was used by policy makers, local representatives and other stakeholders to rebuild towns and villages in conformity with their ideas and interests.⁸⁷ Two questions have frequently been asked in this context. How were dwellings and farmsteads reconstructed after the First World War? And why were they reconstructed in this manner? It should nevertheless be remarked that the rebuilding of farmsteads has all too often been overlooked, as historians have privileged the study of the reconstruction of monumental buildings such as churches, town halls and other landmarks. Still, the publications mentioned below are of great value due to their innovative method to integrate the regionalist debate within the framework of the post-war reconstruction.

Probably the first modern work on the rebuilding of houses after the First World War was published by Jean-Marie De Busscher in 1983. It is noticeable that he adopts a transnational perspective, taking into account Belgian as well as French reconstruction processes. For those two countries, De Busscher examines the spirit of the age of which 'war damage architecture' was a reflection. Architecture is considered here as a cultural product of the interwar years. It is argued that the architecture of reconstructed buildings answered to the broader social evolutions of the time. The strict separation of residential buildings and stables, for example, mirrors contemporary concerns with hygiene. Following from this line of argument, *reconstruction à l'identique* is unmasked as a creative process. Pre-war buildings were not copied, but slightly adjusted to meet new aesthetic, comfort and technical requirements (for an example, see Figure 1). Moreover, regionalist references to the pre-war townscapes supported the widespread wish to forget the atrocities of war.⁸⁸ Unlike other authors, De Busscher states that (young) modernists and regionalist architects never debated post-war reconstruction profoundly, since emotional arguments predominated. The presence of other social actors marginalized the role of architects. As a consequence, the 'reconstitution-reconstruction', as he names it, lacked an underlying theory and was neither a return to traditional architecture, nor a modernist project.⁸⁹

Capronnier and Delorme emphasized the importance of regional culture and geography for the architectural style of farmsteads.⁹⁰ Medieval monastic farms, reorganized during the nineteenth century, characterized Aisne prior to 1914. After the first months of battle, plans were drawn to rebuild these farms in a more rational, sanitary and prestigious manner. Case studies of various farm types from different regions led to the conclusion that rationalization occurred more frequently in larger farms. Nonetheless, floor plans were based mainly on pre-war layouts. Capronnier and Delorme concluded that the reconstruction of farmsteads along traditional lines suggests elements of cultural stability. According to them, this inertia

⁸⁶ G. Bekaert, 'Wederopbouw of het uur van de waarheid', in *Resurgam*, pp. 29–32.

⁸⁷ Smets, 'Inleiding', pp. 10–1.

⁸⁸ J. M. De Busscher, *L'architecture de dommages de guerre: aspects de la reconstruction des régions dévastées de la Première Guerre mondiale* (1983), pp. 5–7.

According to De Busscher, avant-garde and regionalist architects were in agreement on this point.

⁸⁹ De Busscher, *L'architecture*, pp. 198 and 254–6.

⁹⁰ J. C. Capronnier and F. Delorme, 'La reconstruction des fermes dans le département de l'Aisne après 1918', *In Situ* 21 (2013), p. 3.

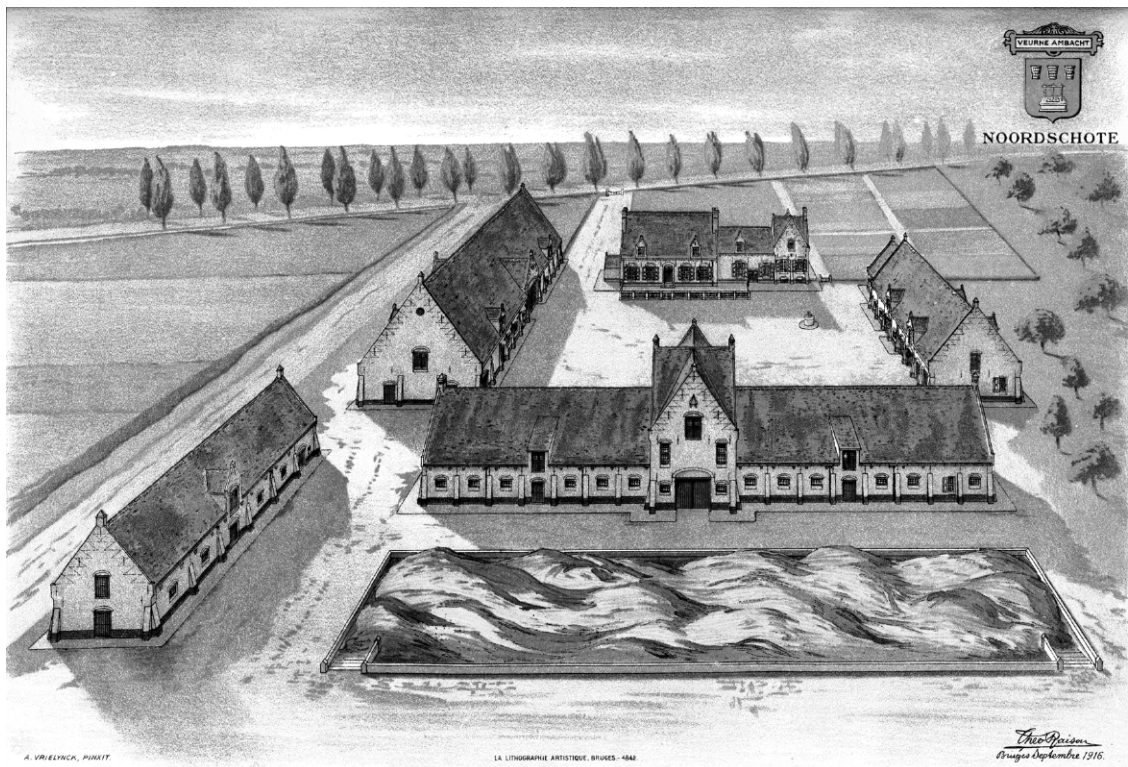


FIGURE 1: The post-war farmsteads looked back to their pre-war predecessors. Adjustments were nevertheless made for reasons of hygiene, efficiency, and modern comfort. This sketch of a monumental Belgian farm, designed by architect Theo Raison, is a textbook example of the so-called regionalist architecture that dominated the reconstruction period.

Source: T. Raison and A. Ronse, *Landelijke bouwingen: algemeene raadgevingen, ontwerp tot het bouwen van eene kleine hofstede, mekanieke toepassingen* (1918).

was fuelled by the parsimonious application of hygienist prescriptions and the preoccupation with a quick rather than an innovative reconstruction.⁹¹

Other scholars have searched for particular meanings and ideologies in the reconstructed buildings. Regionalist architecture does not reflect the spirit of the age or geological and cultural environments, but incorporates power relations, interests and particular preferences. This becomes clear when one looks at the German proposals for the rebuilding of Flemish towns destroyed during the early months of the war. What was intended fitted within the *Flamenpolitik* that aimed to tighten the socio-cultural bonds between Dutch-speaking Flanders and Germany. This was to be done by promoting regionalist architecture from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when German and Brabantian cultures were most closely related. At the same time, the German occupier tried to purge itself of the barbarian

⁹¹ Cappronnier and Delorme, 'La reconstruction des fermes'.

image achieved during the destructive campaign through Belgium.⁹² Economic motives played a part as well: German construction companies were contracted to rebuild roads and buildings.⁹³ Cortjaens examines how German architects were quick to promote their regionalist visions of town planning. Their concern for traditional architecture has to be linked with the then current *Heimatschutz*, the preservation of historic landscapes. However, very few reconstruction plans were eventually realized. The ever-changing situation on the front, logistic and administrative difficulties, and a lack of financial means all had a negative impact on the German initiatives.⁹⁴

When the war ended in November 1918, almost all the damaged or destroyed dwellings in Belgium had still to be rebuilt. Regionalism soon became the quasi-official ideology of reconstruction. Meganck, Van Santvoort and De Maeyer consider the versatility of the regionalist concept to grasp its predominance during the post-war years.⁹⁵ First of all, it ensured continuity within a modernizing and rapidly changing society. Meganck deepens our understanding of how architects conceived regionalism as a way to strengthen the nation's identity. Using a regional form of language for patriotic purposes was not regarded paradoxical, since it was generally agreed among architects that regional climate, soil and mentalities had to be respected. At the same time, architects employed regionalism as a tool to subtly introduce modern standards of hygiene and economics and as a starting point to deal with the aesthetics of rural buildings as an object of study in itself.⁹⁶ This confirms regionalism's strategic role in toning down modernity to acceptable levels. The rebuilding of a Belgian village, Zonnebeke near Ypres, gives us an example of how modernist reconstruction projects were confronted by resistance. The Belgian architect Huib Hoste was appointed to rebuild this village, but his ambitious plans were progressively diluted by the municipal council, the local priest and the inhabitants, and the modernist appearance of the village's public buildings was reduced to 'acceptable' levels. For them, Hoste's designs were just too different from the pre-war appearance of the village.⁹⁷ Other architects, such as Raphaël Verwilghen, Jules Coomans, and Jozef Viérin, subscribed to ideas of regionalist rebuilding. In Zemst, a village north of Brussels, a regionalist architectural style was not objected to by the actors involved. The *Oeuvre Suisse Belge*, which supplied practical and financial aid, rebuilt a couple of farmsteads in picturesque style. Various pressure groups tried to gain influence through participation in the post-war reconstruction activities. But most farmsteads were rebuilt by the farmers themselves, within the framework

⁹² A good introduction to this topic is L. Zuckerman, *The rape of Belgium: the untold story of World War I* (2004).

⁹³ J. Van den Mooter, 'German reconstruction in Belgium during World War I. A regionalist experiment', in L. Meganck, L. Van Santvoort and J. De Maeyer (eds), *Regionalism and modernity. Architecture in Western Europe, 1914-1940* (2013), pp. 55-6 and 60-3.

⁹⁴ W. Cortjaens, 'The German way of making better cities'. German reconstruction plans for Belgium during the First World War', in N. Bullock, L. Verpoest and L. Vints (eds), *Living with history 1914-1964: rebuilding Europe after the First and Second World War*

and the role of heritage preservation (2011), pp. 49 and 55-6.

⁹⁵ L. Meganck, L. Van Santvoort, and J. De Maeyer, 'Introduction', in Meganck *et al.* (eds), *Regionalism and modernity*, pp. 7-13.

⁹⁶ L. Meganck, 'Patriotism, genius loci, authentic buildings and imitation farmsteads. Regionalism in interwar Belgium', in Meganck *et al.* (eds), *Regionalism and modernity*, pp. 73-5.

⁹⁷ P. Jaspers, 'Huib Hoste and the reconstruction of Zonnebeke, 1919-1924', in Bullock *et al.* (eds), *Living with history*, pp. 218-29.

established by the government.⁹⁸ This was generally seen as the best solution to balance the individual right to reconstruct private properties with the principle of national solidarity.

The rebuilding of dwellings and farmsteads in France started in 1917, when the German Army retreated to the Hindenburg Line and left 1223 villages in Allied hands. Professional planners and architects gradually institutionalized their influence in official state services such as the Interministerial Reconstruction Committee (Comité Interministériel pour la Reconstruction). Most architects preferred a reconstruction that was engrafted onto the pre-war built environment of the villages. Standardization and foreign influences had to be avoided whatever the cost.⁹⁹ However, recent publications on the regionalist debate have unanimously revised the modernist discourse on regionalism as retrograde architecture. Regionalist architects indeed acknowledged the importance of modern building materials such as concrete, and adopted contemporary functional or hygienic standards. New building techniques changed the traditional rural architecture profoundly and contributed to the uniformity of the rural landscape. Voldman explains the ambiguity of regionalism as the wish to forget the war without ignoring the post-war *force de vie*.¹⁰⁰ But why did different actors identify themselves with regionalism? According to Mihail, architects strategically set themselves up as defenders of both tradition and technical innovation. He even goes further to argue that most reconstruction projects after 1918 were utilitarian in nature. This variant of regionalism, which he labels 'traditionalism', was not so much preoccupied with a thorough reconstruction of past architecture; form was secondary to technical and economic imperatives. For Mihail, traditionalist architecture was an integral part of a reconstruction process that served the ideological and economic interests of the mainly conservative elite of the Nord department. The recovery of the landscape had to both lessen the attraction of the (industrialized) cities and restore the pre-war social order.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, regionalist reconstruction was seen as the reaffirmation of a French national identity. Doucet states that, in Lorraine, the architectural diversity that drew on the pre-war vistas of towns reinforced regional identity. Buildings erected in Gothic and Romanesque style looked back to Lorraine's golden ages. This was also the case in French Flanders.¹⁰² But regionalist building plans did not find favour with the returning *sinistrés*. As in Belgium, farms and houses were for the most part reconstructed by private owners themselves. The local Northern French population had its own priorities; a quick recovery was preferred over stylistic fidelity. This, in combination with post-war inflation, meant that architects had to give up at least a part of their ideals.¹⁰³ To what degree regionalist guidelines actually influenced the rebuilding of farmsteads is still an open question.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ L. Van Santvoort, 'Wederopbouwarchitectuur in de fusiegemeente Zemst', *M&L. Monumenten, Landschappen en Archeologie* 33 (2014), pp. 6–29.

⁹⁹ Capronnier, 'Penser la reconstruction', pp. 50 and 60.

¹⁰⁰ D. Voldman, 'La France d'un modèle de reconstruction à l'autre, 1918–1945', in P. Jaspers, 'Huib Hoste and the reconstruction of Zonnebeke, 1919–1924', in Bullock *et al.* (eds), *Living with history*, p. 69.

¹⁰¹ B. Mihail, 'Les ambiguïtés du régionalisme architectural après la Grande Guerre. L'exemple de la Flandre

française', in Bullock *et al.* (eds), *Living with history*, pp. 104–25.

¹⁰² J. C. Vigato, 'Between progress and tradition. The regionalist debate in France'; H. Doucet, 'Searching for a new image. An idealized regionalism in Lorraine', both in Meganick *et al.* (eds), *Regionalism and modernity*, pp. 36–7, 40–7; Mihail, 'Les Ambiguïtés'.

¹⁰³ Capronnier, 'Penser la reconstruction'.

¹⁰⁴ This question was first posed by J. Cornilly, 'Een streekeigen hoeve', *In de Steigers*, 14 (2007), p. 86.

IV

If historiographical trends are cyclical in nature, then research on various aspects of the First World War has witnessed a boom over the last couple of decades. Studies regarding the war's impact on agriculture have multiplied, and so too have publications on the post-war recovery of the countryside in Belgium and France. Embedded within the historiography of (modern) rural and agricultural history, studies on the post-war reconstruction of the countryside mainly tell a story of continuity. Except for the first couple of years after the Armistice, when the Belgian and French governments helped to recover land and granted premiums and goods to bring the devastated regions back into cultivation, state intervention was in essence limited to the distribution of war compensation. The rural economy remained based on small- and medium-scale farms, since radical transformations of the landscape were the exception rather than the rule. The disappearance of hedgerows nevertheless facilitated the introduction of agricultural machines. The rebuilding of farmsteads has predominantly been approached as an example of 'integrated modernity', combining a traditional architectural style with subtle innovations such as the physical separation of houses and stables.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the existing literature has suggested that the post-war recovery of the countryside built on long-term agricultural changes and did not represent a radical shift towards modernization.

However, it has to be stressed that few works have placed the post-war recovery of the countryside in a larger rural and agricultural context. The first publications on post-war reconstruction took a rather general stance and focused on government policies. This top-down perspective was soon abandoned. Making use of law texts, parliamentary documents, local archives and journals, (social) historians pointed at the *tension* between the national governments and local *sinistrés* as the driving force for post-war reconstruction. While Belgian and French policy makers were mainly concerned with the financial and organizational aspects and (to a lesser extent) town planning, inhabitants of the devastated regions sought a quick return to pre-war normality. Reconstructed landscapes and farmsteads were seen as products of these concerns. With new historical sources becoming available, successive authors have revised this binary opposition by drawing other actors into the picture, such as cooperatives, pressure groups, and local authorities. To highlight their impact on the landscape, research has mostly been undertaken on a regional or local scale. Simultaneously, the regionalist architectural style employed when rebuilding most farmsteads was being interpreted as the means to tone down modernity to acceptable levels. The rise of cultural explanatory models also affected the study of social actors and rural landscapes, as research on the mentalities of *sinistrés* and the meanings of reconstructed landscapes have continued to gain popularity.

While the focus on mentalities and particular interests has certainly contributed to our understanding of the post-war reconstruction in Belgium and France, we have to be aware of the pitfall of ignoring the socio-economic developments that influenced this process. A varying population density, post-war inflation, the scarcity of building materials and a dysfunctional transport network all had their influence and need more attention. This is also

¹⁰⁵ I borrow this concept from A. Bergmans *et al.*, 'Inleiding: Een pleidooi voor goede manieren', in A. Bergmans *et al.* (eds), *Neostijlen in de negentiende eeuw. Zorg geboden?* (2002), pp. 7–9.

true for the social, economic and geographic aspects of the reconstruction processes. In the case of Belgium, no publication yet exists that outlines the course of this enormous financial, organizational and practical endeavour. The return of local inhabitants and their experience of the ruined landscapes, the contribution of international organizations, the (planned but rarely implemented) land rationalization, or the financial costs of this whole effort have all been virtually unstudied. The reconstruction of fields and farmsteads deserves more thorough research as well.

Our knowledge of the topic can indeed be broadened by filling in these historiographical lacunae. At the same time, our understanding of the research domain should be deepened by chronologically and geographically reframing it. This will benefit explanatory research methods and will make it easier to evaluate the importance of the reconstruction processes for the post-war countryside and agriculture. As for the chronological boundaries, the majority of publications have started at the end of the war and concluded somewhere around 1930, when most of the reconstruction work had been done. Preparations nevertheless started from 1915 onwards, after policy makers, architects and others had witnessed the destructive power of industrial warfare. From a methodological point of view, a long-term perspective allows to really evaluate to what extent the post-war reconstruction was a rupture with regard to land-use change and the modernization of farms and landscape structures. The geographical framework has often been restricted to the local or regional level for heuristic reasons. Some writers have analysed the activities of social actors through a national lens but studies of the post-war reconstruction of rural landscapes would certainly profit from a transnational perspective. As the course of events ran strikingly similar in Belgium and France, mutual relations and networks of cooperation must have existed.

A deeper understanding of the reconstruction of the landscape of the Western Front should also lead us to shift our attention to other theatres of war, in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Moreover, a transnational approach will help to discover acts of reconstruction within national boundaries. Were partially destroyed lands, situated behind the frontline, reconstructed in the same manner as the front zone itself? How can divergences between local reconstruction practices be explained? The centennial anniversary of the Armistice will hopefully give impetus to research that answers some of these questions.