REBUILDING ALBERT:RECONSTRUCTION AND REMEMBRANCE ON THE WESTERN FRONT, 1914-1932

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Abstract

Located in the department of the Somme, the town of Albert lay in close proximity to the theatre of war throughout much of the 1914-18 conflict. By the time of its final liberation in August 1918, it had twice suffered occupation and had been reduced by artillery fire to an unrecognisable mass of ruins. This thesis will explore the process by which a devastated town and its exiled community was rebuilt in the post-war period.

One of the principal aims here is to reassess what we mean by the word 'reconstruction.' It is perhaps inevitable that the powerful physicality of the Western Front has acquired a dominant grip upon the imaginations of historians who have written about the reconstruction period. As such, in much that has been written upon devastated departments like the Somme, reconstruction tends to be viewed as a one-dimensional process of physical restoration; a story of how farmland deemed sterile and worthless by the state in 1918 was lovingly restored to productivity; of how villages lacking any visible remnants at the time of the Armistice were able to celebrate their inaugurations in 1932. Crucial though the tangible elements of reconstruction are to our understanding of the post-war period, other more subtle dimensions of reconstruction have been ignored, underplayed or simply misunderstood. This thesis will outline a new approach by combining a narrative of the physical hardships faced by communities in the ruins of the post-war Somme with an examination of reconstruction as a social, political, cultural and ideological experience.

Though the focal point throughout remains the town of Albert and the villages which fell within its canton, the approach adopted in this thesis ultimately places reconstruction in a much broader political context. It requires us to question how the experiences of war and its aftermath shaped political attitudes in the 1920s and 1930s; to explore whether devastated departments such as the Somme retained aspects of their frontier identities in to the final decade of the inter-war era; to examine how the memory of the reconstruction era may have shielded towns such as Albert from the bitter political poisons which consumed the Third Republic.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AF	Archives de France
ADS	Archives Départementales de la Somme
AMA	Archives Municipales d'Albert
BCA	Bibliothèque Communale d'Amiens
BNF	Bibliothèque Nationale de France
IWM	Imperial War Museum Department of Documents
ORA	Office de la Reconstitution Agricole
ORI	Office de la Reconstitution Industrielle
SRRL	Service de la Reconstitution des Régions Libérées
STE	Services des Travaux de l'État
STPU	Servies des Travaux de Premier Urgence

INTRODUCTION

> It is not now an attractive town; probably it never was. It is a small straggling town built of red brick along a knot of cross roads at a point where the swift chalk-river Ancre, hardly more than a brook is bridged....Its most important building is a big church built a few years ago through the energy of a priest, as a shrine for the Virgin of Albert, a small, probably not very old image, about which strange stories are told. Before the war it was thought that this church would become a northern rival to Lourdes for the working of miraculous cures during the September pilgrimage. A gilded statue of the Virgin and Child stood on an iron stalk on the summit of the church tower. During a bombardment of the town at a little after three o'clock in the afternoon of Friday, January 15 1915, a shell so bent the stalk that the statue bent down over the place as though diving. Perhaps few of our soldiers will remember Albert for anything except this diving virgin. Perhaps half of the men engaged in the battle of the Somme passed underneath her as they marched up to the line, and, glancing up, hoped that she might not come down till they were past. From someone, French or English, a word has gone about that when she does fall the war will end. Others have said that French engineers have so fixed her with wire that she cannot fall.[1]

John Masefield's encounter with the ruined town of Albert took place in late 1916. Following the first battle of the Somme (July-November 1916), the trenches of the Somme sector lay deserted; Masefield's book, *The Old Front Line* -a formative work in the genre of battlefield tourist literature- was both a topographical tour of an empty battlefield and a description of mass devastation. Within Albert's canton, deserted, derelict villages which had for more than 2 years been located on the German side of No Man's Land were compared with those of medieval Europe, 'smitten by the plague.' 'Villages during the Black Death must have looked thus' wrote Masefield.[2] Inevitably, the gaunt image of Albert and its golden Virgin loomed large in the author's vision of the Somme. By virtue of the perilously angular

[1] John Masefield, *The Old Front Line or the Beginning of the Battle of the Somme,* (London, 1917), pp.14-15.
[2] John Masefield, *The Old Front Line*, p.17

position it had acquired through shell fire, the statue had spawned a widely disseminated legend of the war's imminent closure. Largely unheard of prior to the war, Albert had assumed a mythic status in the wartime imagination, and would have been strangely familiar to those who purchased Masefield's book in 1917.

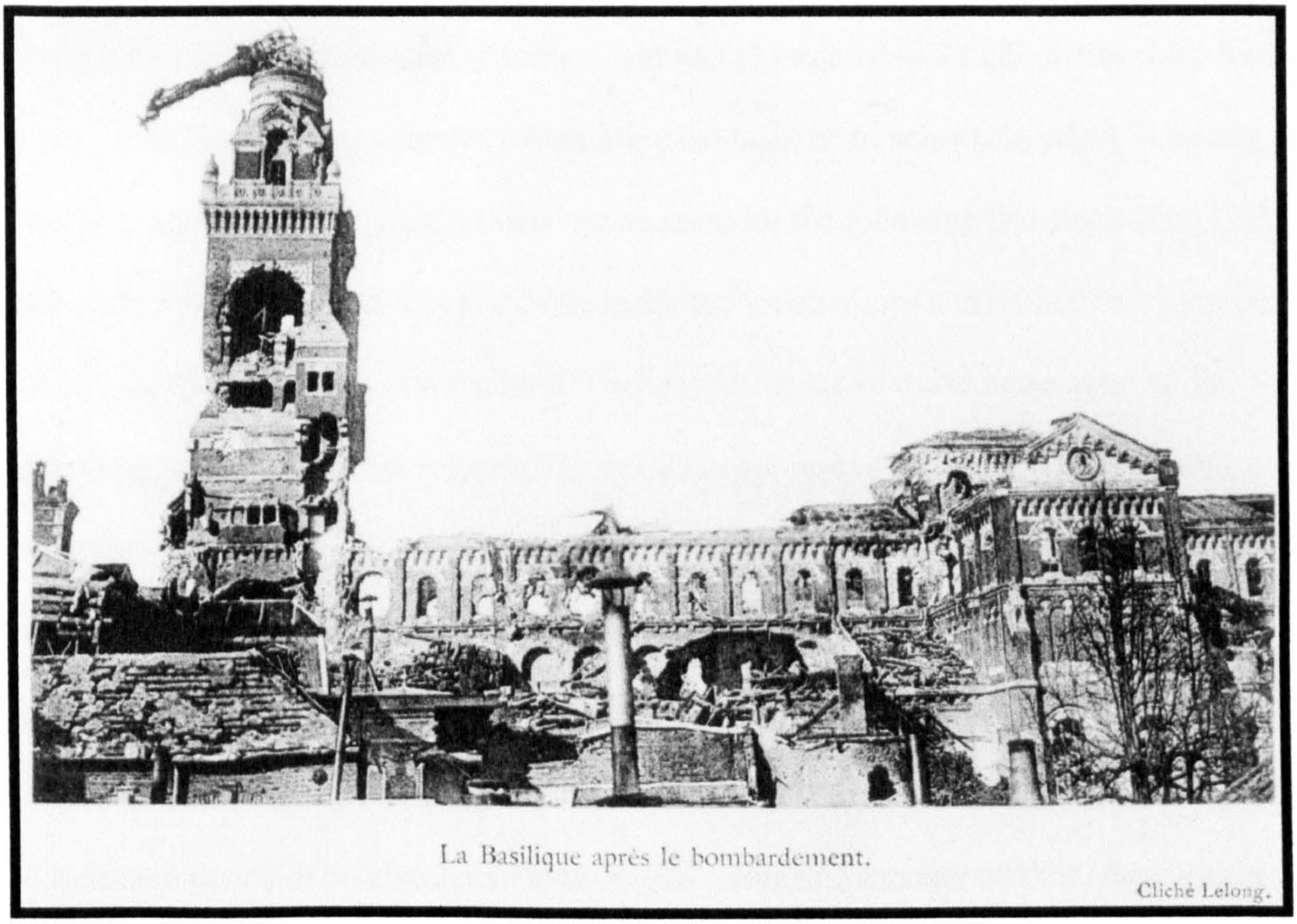

Figure 1: Notre Dame de Brébières after the artillery bombardment of October 1914- February 1915 (ADS.DA756)

Throughout the three previous years Albert had been close to the epicentre of the theatre of war in the Somme, falling within an 80 kilometre band of devastation, which stretched north-eastwards from the departmental *chef-lieu* Amiens, to small towns such as Épehy, located close to the fringes of Aisne, Pas-de-Calais and Nord. To the west of Amiens, small rural communes stretching out to the town of Abbeville, and beyond it to the fishing villages in the bay of the Somme, were physically untouched by the Great War, though each fell

within the geographical parameters of the allied military zone. Amiens itself was occupied by the German army for a 13 day period which began on 31 August 1914. Its early capture represented the most westerly point of the advances they would make in the Somme throughout the whole of the 1914-18 war. The withdrawal of the Germans from Amiens -a tactical retreat necessitated by the 'miracle of the Marne' took place on 12 September. The front-line shifted to the north-east of Amiens and was re-established 35 kilometres away from the city, in the heart of the canton of Albert. Here the maze of trench-works which were dug in the final weeks of 1914 would remain largely static for the following two years. In the first battle of the Somme, limited advances were made by British troops and pushed the front-line back beyond the boundaries of the canton. The 'genial' retreat of the German army to the Hindenburg Line in March 1917 moved the trenches eastwards by a further 30 kilometres. This ensured that Amiens fell beyond the grasp of the German troops for the duration of the Great War. Even when the German Spring Offensive of March 1918 threatened the entire department, approximately 12 kilometres would separate Amiens from the most advanced positions of their troops. But the city remained well within the range of the German artillery. In a sustained period of bombardment between the spring and summer of 1918, the German army attempted to compensate for its inability to recapture Amiens by destroying it. Over 3,000 bombs rained down on the city, destroying or damaging 2000 houses, killing over 200 people and culminating in its total evacuation.

Albert's own period of occupation was similarly brief, ending in the middle of September 1914, when the German front-line was established just 3 kilometres to the north-east of the town, straddling the highway linking Albert to Bapaume and dissecting the 25 rural villages which lay within its canton. Albert and small villages such as Aveluy, Bécordel and Mesnil-Martinsart would form front-line communes on the allied side of the military zone.

Thiepval, Authuille, La Boisselle and Fricourt were all heavily fortified outposts set amidst the German trenches. Albert's size, industrial importance and proximity to the front-line, rendered it vulnerable to artillery bombardment. A 5 month period of shelling from October 1914 to February 1915 would lay to waste over half of the town's buildings (approximately 1000) and spawn the image of la *vierge penchée* which was captured in endless wartime postcards, and highlighted in numerous battlefield tourist guides including Masefield's own work. By August 1918 however, Albert existed only in memory, or as a photographic or literary image. The skeletal church and town surrounding it had all been physically erased from the landscape. Occupied for a second period by the German army when the Spring Offensive enveloped the town in March 1918, Albert suffered a further 5 month period of bombardment, this time from the British guns ranged to the south-west of the town. When the journalist Albert Londres visited Albert and its canton in September 1918 (in the wake of its final liberation), he was no longer able to draw upon the familiar iconography of Albert, or even establish the boundaries of individual communes. Instead he encountered a sterile landscape, rendered uniform by the totality of its devastation.

> Have you ever seen a desert? Until recently, the only deserts known to us have been found outside Europe. If you have an interest in this type of environment, you should undertake a new voyage. A second type of desert has recently appeared on the surface of the globe. It is in the Somme. In fact it is not only there; wherever the full fury of the armies is felt, a new desert emerges; at the end of every one of our great battles, a new desert can be found. But if you want to discover the greatest of all deserts, choose the Somme. There are no people, there are no plants. No one can be heard speaking, nothing can be seen growing...stop and listen for a while; perhaps you'll see some evidence of life, of human life, of crops growing in the fields. People used to live here and farm the land. Now it is finished.[3]

This then, was the impact of 51 months of industrialised warfare on one department on the Western Front. The physical plight of 9 other departments -Aisne, Ardennes, Marne, Meuse, Meurthe-et-Moselle, Nord, Oise, Pas-de-Calais and Vosges- would in due course be frozen in

[3] Albert Londres, *Contre le bourrage de crâne* (Paris, 1989), pp.208-9.

similar phraseology as France witnessed a literary outpouring of post-war emotion. Underscored in these attempts to capture the visual impact of mass devastation -be they by renowned literary figures such as Maurice Barrès and Roland Dorgelès, or the many amateur poets whose work adorned the front pages of *Le Figaro*- was the cultural complexity of the wasteland spawned by war.[4] In time the 'desert' would of course become a crucial ideological component in the construct of Europe's 'moral boulevard'; its powerful physicality being emblematic of *poilu* heroism and the post-war claims by *anciens combattants* over civilian France. But it also represented the remnants of home for thousands of people whose lives and livelihoods had been shattered by occupation, devastation and exile. For the French state, the 'desert' presented itself more eloquently through the dry logic of statistical analysis. The figures gathered by post-war bureaucrats indicated a *bilan de guerre* of unprecedented scale. In the Somme alone, figures on devastation which read thus -205 communes (approximately a quarter of the department's communes) destroyed in their totality, 175 in ruins, 36,000 houses reduced to rubble with a further 33,000 in a state of dereliction; 33,000 farm buildings destroyed along with 330 schools, 274 churches and 431 public buildings; 6,761 kilometres of roads and 500 kilometres of railway line all being wiped out- pointed towards the massive logistical challenge of coping with the return of refugees.[5] And beyond this there loomed a financial nightmare which threatened to bankrupt France and undermine the fragile post-war coalition of allied nations which had fought side by side in 1914-18. The mythologies created by those who experienced the hardship of the desert would bear testimony to these complexities, post-war identity across the Western Front mirroring a landscape which in a political sense, would remain a battlefield throughout much of the 1920s.

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[4] BNF.LC13-9, *Le Figaro.* Throughout December 1919, *Le Figaro* published the winning poems in its *concours de la paix.*

[5] R.Meissel, *La Picardie dans la Grande Guerre 1914-18* (Amiens, 1986), pp.115-116.

The rich cultural significance of this landscape points towards a field of historical research which is ripe for exploitation. Overripe, perhaps. Given the paucity of interest in the 15 year long process of reconstruction which followed the Great War, the despairing sense of finality which Londres attributed to *la Somme dévastée* in 1918 remains strangely apt today. If Albert is remembered at all, it is almost certainly as Masefield spoke of it -a ruined military outpost, resplendent with its leaning virgin and the legend that the Great War would end when she crashed on to the town below. Though the enduring nature of remembrance mythology ensures that the Somme as a whole remains remarkably familiar to us, it is imagined as a back and white or sepia image, culturally coherent only in as much as it is capable of engineering a sense of awe at the nihilistic extremes of modern warfare. Regeneration in the aftermath of 1914-18 is in a sense anathema to the prevailing influences on the modern memory and has acquired only a peripheral role in the collective imagination. So powerful is the optic of the Great War, that Helen McPhail has asserted 'approaching the Western Front from Great Britain- whether literally or mentally- still seems to mean approaching a substantial barrier: we look at the front-line and not beyond it...For many British observers the almost mythic nature of the Western Front seems to act as a mirror; it is too easy to gaze at our own reflection, to observe the long struggle of the British troops in their trenches, and fail to see beyond.'[6]

To what might we attribute this failure to 'see beyond' the trenches of 1914-18? In Britain, the historiographical stranglehold created by the 'rediscovery' of the Western Front in the 1960s, and the veritable avalanche of books, films, TV documentaries, and battlefield guides

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[6] Helen McPhail, *The Long Silence: Civilian Life Under the German Occupation of Northern France 1914-18,* (London, 2001), p.1

it has sustained ever since, clearly play their part.[7] But whilst it is easy to see how the modern obsession with the horror of the Great War has served to marginalise the quieter civilian histories spawned in its immediate aftermath, the process of denying the *régions dévastées* an alternative history to that of the rest of France in the inter-war years, was already underway in the 1920s. If public curiosity about the plight of returnees to the Western Front spawned an initial wave of literary interest, this proved to be ephemeral in nature. By the middle of the decade, the ruins had lost their more dramatic vistas and whatever fraternal empathy had existed with the *sinistrés* of the Western Front was dissipated by the spiralling costs of reconstruction. Serious financial scandals involving fraudulent war damage claims by large scale industrialists had turned much of the Parisian press against the ten devastated departments, which it now viewed as the Third Republic's new 'Panama.' Sympathy from abroad proved to be similarly short-lived, Anglo-Saxon relations with France being shaped by the same culture of denial and recrimination which emanated from the global sore-point of footing the bill for the Great War. Accusatory voices from both Britain and the United States preceded the French to Versailles and grew louder thereafter. The political, economic and diplomatic disaster which was the occupation of the Ruhr between 1923 and 1924 further shifted recognition of post-war French suffering from the paradigm of the moral boulevard, the French as a nation being castigated in sections of the British press as the 'mad dogs of Europe.'[8] By the beginning of the 1930s, the inauguration ceremonies which were the crowning glory of a fifteen year labour for thousands of communes across the Western Front, appear to have passed by with only a modicum of national or international recognition.

Consumed by political unrest, economic problems and the bleak international backdrop of a

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[7] See Brian Bond, "Donkeys and Flanders Mud: the War Rediscovered in the 1960s", in Brian Bond,*The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge, 2002), chapter 3, pp. 51-75.

[8] ADS.241PER19, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 3 August 1939.

European continent polarised by Fascism and Communism, the 1930s in France was marked not by the regeneration of the *régions dévastées*, but by what Eugen Weber has termed the 'nightmare of fear.'[9]And the psychic trauma of the Second World War, bringing with it genocide, mass death and devastation, which though unimaginable in scale, was very much the logical consequence of this inter-war nightmare, has all but erased the *régions dévastées* from the collective memory of the twentieth century.

If the historians who have delved in to the departmental archives of northern France with reconstruction in mind remain few and far between, recent historiographical developments have taken place nonetheless, laying crucial foundations to our understanding of the inter-war reconstruction and shaping the conceptual form of this present work. Of principal importance is the 1996 study by the historical geographer Hugh Clout, *After the Ruins: Restoring the Countryside of Northern France after the Great War*. Recognising the shortcomings in Jean Favier's 1991 work, *Reconstructions et modernisations* (its focus fell predominantly upon the technical aspects of post-1945 reconstruction) Clout provided a highly detailed examination of reconstruction in its provisional and definitive phases across the 10 devastated departments. Continuing his interest in aspects of rural restoration, Clout contributed to a collective work entitled *Reconstructions en Picardie après 1918* in the following year. This work, published in conjunction with an exhibition on reconstruction in the departments of Aisne, Oise and Somme represented something of a welcome shift away from the technical detailed histories of reconstruction, by placing far greater emphasis upon the social aspects of life in the ruins. In particular, chapters by Professor Philippe Nivet and Gérard Lobry both drew much needed attention to the hardships experienced by early returnees to the hastily

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[9] See Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s*, (London, 1995), chapter 9.

erected provisional towns of the Western Front.[10] A similar focus has likewise prevailed more recently in David de Sousa's study, *La reconstruction et sa mémoire dans les villages de la Somme (1918-1932)*. Published in 2000, this work is one of the few to have resisted the temptation of the wider canvas which is offered by the homogenous geography of the *régions dévastées*. Narrowing his focus to that of his native department, de Sousa has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the communities which regrouped in the ruins of the department.

This present work is an attempt to 'see beyond' the trenches of 1914-18 by narrowing the field of vision further still. Why then has the focus fallen upon Albert? What is there beyond the legend of the golden virgin which warrants our specific attention? Given the extent of the devastation created by the Great War- some 400 km of ruins stretching from the channel coast to the Vosges- there is little in Albert's post-war history which marks it out as more significant than Péronne, Lens or thousands of other communes which suffered in like manner in 1914-18. It should be stressed therefore, that the actual choice of Albert is far less significant than the decision to limit the study to just one town and a handful of surrounding villages. The geographical constraints which have been placed on this study may effectively reduce much of the Somme (and indeed the Western Front as a whole) to little more than a social and political backdrop, but they underpin a more ambitious set of objectives. Since the publication of Clout's ground breaking work, the emphasis has been very much upon the study of reconstruction as a process of rebuilding the physical infrastructure of the towns and villages which were lost in the Great War. As yet, no attempt has been made to question more rigorously what we mean by reconstruction; to look at different ways of exploiting the

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[10] See Philippe Nivet, "Le retour des réfugiés", pp. 22-33 and Gerard Lobry, "La vie au provisoire", pp. 34-49 in *Reconstructions en Picardie après 1918* (Paris 2000).

immensely rich archival material which lies at our disposal. This thesis will present the case that the time has come to move away from the limitations of imagining reconstruction via a procession of statistics. Instead we need to rethink the inter-war era in the *régions dévastées* by examining reconstruction in its social, political and ideological dimensions, rather than merely viewing it as a physical process of restoration. This arguably demands a more complex synthesis of archival material than has previously been attempted by the more technically minded approaches to reconstruction. As such, its feasibility depends upon a more intimate understanding of the social identities of a given community. Thus, Albert with its population of around 7,000 -rather than the 205 ruined communes of the Somme as a whole- presents itself as an appropriate field of study.

If the geographical parameters of this study point towards a radically different approach towards reconstruction, a different chronological framework has been equally significant in shaping the thesis. Thus far debates on post-war reconstruction have taken place with only fleeting references to the politics of the Third Republic. The net result has been the predominance of a strangely depoliticised version of French history; reconstruction in the *régions dévastées* appears to take place in something of a political and cultural void, contrasting awkwardly with the political landscape of the nation as a whole, where ideological polarity was acquiring a stranglehold upon inter-war life. This conceptual flaw in the historiography of the reconstruction period emanates from the logic of looking to either the beginning of the Great War in 1914, or the armistice in 1918 as the starting point of the reconstruction era; a characteristic of all that has been written so far on the subject. Thus in Clout's *After the Ruins*, the author rightly lays stress on the reconstruction laws passed by the National Assembly in December 1914 as the first significant act by the state towards post-war restoration. In the opening pages of *La reconstruction et sa mémoire* David de

Sousa provides us with a fleeting glimpse of the Somme in the pre-war era, but like Clout, looks upon the more familiar terrain of devastation in the aftermath of hostilities as the dominant focal point of his narrative. This approach has its evident strengths, but by so acting we seem to be permitting the *régions dévastées* a prehistory which stretches no further back than the first bombardments of 1914. To do so is to ignore the profound sense of cultural schism which poisoned community identity throughout much of France in the pre-war era; to make the risky assumption that that the bitter divisions created in this period had no meaningful effect upon post-war reconstruction. As such, though we may learn much about reconstruction as a physical process, we learn comparatively little about reconstruction as a medium through which a process of social ordering, gender subordination or politically driven score-settling may have manifested itself. Without some knowledge of the ideological tensions which may have defined communities on the eve of devastation, the effect of war, exile, devastation and resettlement upon the formation of post-war identity will always remain something of a blank page.

This traditional approach will no longer suffice. Rich in anecdotal texture, though much of the work on reconstruction has thus far been, the striking absence of attention to the politics of the Third Republic has resulted in a flattened image of the communities which inhabited the *régions dévastées*. The chronological and conceptual framework which shapes this study of Albert will enable us to redress the problem. In chapter one, 'The Lourdes of the North: Politics and Pilgrimage on the Eve of Devastation' the legacy of the Dreyfus affair and the politics of anticlericalism will be explored through reference to Albert's community as it existed on the eve of the Great War. Albert, as Masefield was to inform his British readers in 1917, was a pilgrimage town with pretensions as a rival site to Lourdes. Whilst Masefield's

dismissive tone suggested that this amounted to little more than a facet of quaint local curiosity, it loomed far larger in the political psyche of the Third Republic. Eighty thousand pilgrims were making annual visits to the town on the eve of the Great War, their presence engendering the local poisons between Catholics and Seculars which were to be found throughout France prior to 1914. By drawing attention to divisions of this nature, we are not merely indulging in extraneous scene-setting prior to exploring the real stuff of war and reconstruction, for what we understand about the pre-war era is central to our approach to the post-war ruins. That the communities which regrouped across the desert of the Somme in 1919 were profoundly marked by a sense of rupture and dislocation, is undeniable. But should we assume that pre-war poisons simply dissipated amidst the chaos of exile and devastation? A key element in the latter stages of this thesis is the examination of the politics of reconstruction through the optic of pre-war friendships, rivalries and contested ideologies. An opening chapter which deals neither with war nor post-war restoration, but the relative calm of the pre-war era is therefore central in shaping our understanding of the word 'reconstruction.'

Between the hasty dispersal of 1914 and the chaotic wave of resettlement in 1919, there was the Great War itself. An examination of how Albert's community responded to the trauma of occupation (by the German, French and British armies at various stages of the conflict), exile and devastation will form the basis of chapter two, 'The Vermin of the Front: Front-line Identity in 1914-18.' Here too, the terrain is largely unfamiliar, for whilst the physical effects of the Great War inevitably loom large in books about reconstruction, its social effects have gone largely unnoticed. A study of Albert and its canton in 1914-18 will by necessity, be divided between those who from August 1914 to March 1918 remained in the ruined outposts of the military zone- *les indéracinables*- and those who sought exile in the towns and villages

which lay beyond the line of fire- *les réfugiés*. For both communities, the day-to-day hardships of war would be exacerbated by the apparent indifference of the nation as a whole towards their status as *victimes de guerre*; their collective sense of injustice developing as the accusatory culture of wartime France began to single out refugees as *la vermine du front*, an amoral 'other' sullied by a cohabitation with the enemy, and largely unwelcome in the interior communes to which they fled. For the communities which regrouped in the ruins of the Somme in 1919, these aspects of civilian war experience -unique to those whose towns and villages fell within the military zones- would lie at the core of post-war identity, affecting a profound influence upon the politics of reconstruction in the post-war era.

In chapter three, 'Inviolable in the Majesty of Their Desert: Resettlement and its Myths, 1918-1921' our attention falls upon the ruined wasteland, which for most historians has formed the logical point of departure in the study of reconstruction. Here, the chronological parameters of the chapter are guided by what the French state termed the 'emergency phase' of reconstruction. This period -marked by appalling levels of sanitation, lawlessness and severe physical hardship across the ruins- has attracted considerable attention from historians. And whilst much important research in the day-to-day life in the provisional towns has already been accomplished by the likes of Philippe Nivet and David de Sousa, our understanding of political identity in the ruins had been hampered by the absence of reference to the crucial cultural backdrop of pre-war France. It has lead us to fall in to the trap of uncritically accepting the mythology which shrouded the process of post-war return and resettlement. For instance, a predominant theme in the writing of both Nivet and de Sousa is the insistence that the flood of returnees to the ruins of the Western Front was fundamentally underpinned by the collective love of the French peasantry towards the ancestral soil. It is not difficult to find the literary sources which provide their argument with

a veneer of credibility: few writers who visited the *régions dévastées* resisted the temptation of eulogising over the mystical union between peasant and earth. This myth- a mainstay of French nationalism since the dawn of the Third Republic in 1870- would serve a multitude of political and ideological functions in the aftermath of the Great War. Understanding what these functions were -and what they reveal about the fractious relationship between the resettled communities of the Western Front and the undamaged regions of the interior- will form a central focus in this chapter.

At the core of the relationship lay the open sore of post-war finance. It is no exaggeration to state that communities across the *régions dévastées* were gripped by fears over the willingness of the state to meet the *bilan de guerre* of 1914-18. Writ-large in the Somme's newspapers, the collective resentment towards the state and interior departments of France would be expressed via the vitriolic reference to *la France épargnée*. This feeling of isolation and despair had its more subtle dimensions however, and would be reflected in the very nature of mourning and memorialisation which took place in the ruins of the Somme. Chapter four, 'We Are The War's True Vanquished: Remembrance in the Ruins' remains within the same chronological parameters of 1918-21 and aims to explore the process of mourning and remembrance. Here too, we encounter a field of research which has been left almost wholly unnoticed. For whilst our understanding of how Europeans confronted the memory of mass death in the Great War has been enhanced by an impressive body of recent research -Antoine Prost's *Les Anciens Combattants et la Societé Française*, Annette Becker's *Les Monuments aux Morts* and Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning* being the most important works to date on French war remembrance- the inclination has been to conceptualise communities in mourning via distinctions of class, gender or nationality. That

the Western Front looms large in the European imagination is undeniable, but it does so as a 'moral boulevard' bringing with it a generic sense of meaning. Wholly absent from the historiography of post-war remembrance has been an examination of how the Western front -as a physical landscape- shaped the collective memories of those who returned to inhabit it after 1918. How could communities such as that of Albert transcend and forget the horror of war, when the abject remnants of the conflict remained a visible aspect of daily life? On what terms were they prepared to espouse the comforting terrain of the more sanitised mythologies offered by the state? Collective remembrance inevitably acquires political meaning amongst any community which experiences a catastrophe; in the ruins of the Somme it is clear that the culture of remembrance was informed by the politics of reconstruction. By examining the unique characteristics of post-war remembrance in towns such as Albert, we acquire crucial insights in to the bleak uncertainties which shrouded the reconstruction era.

For some of the Western Front's many victims, it is apparent that fear and uncertainty acquired a more durable grip on daily life than for others. Some would suffer from periods of post-war inflation which devalued their war damage evaluations; others would profit from brief periods of deflation. Some would likewise fall victim to the systematic policy of under-evaluation employed by the ministry for the Liberated Regions in 1920, or other forms of penny-pinching such as the frequent cuts in the budget allocated to the *régions dévastées* announced by the ministry, or its increasing dependence on treasury bonds as a magical substitute for liquid currency. This hated form of war damages -the O.D.N certificate- would contribute to an almost complete standstill in work-sites across the ruins of the Somme in 1924. Nevertheless, by the middle of the decade, almost half of Albert had been successfully rebuilt. Chapter five, 'If You Want a War, You Shall Have a War: Politics in the Social Phase, 1919-1925' will provide a closer examination of those who may be crudely classified

as the winners and losers of the reconstruction era. For it was in this period- between 1919-1925- that the social and economic priorities of the state were made manifest. Similarly discernible was the process of social ordering which took place within Albert's community. Through the work of the cantonal war damage evaluation commission (a body drawn from local councillors, professionals and businessmen) reconstruction in Albert became recognisable as a medium through which pre-war business alliances, political friendships and enmities could be brought to bear in shaping both the physical form of the post-war town and its social identity.

The last 7 years of the reconstruction era were marked by a similarly industrious level of rebuilding in Albert with 1000 buildings being constructed between 1925-32. But the period also witnessed the re-emergence of a more fractious political relationship between Radicals and Catholics within the town. Chapter six 'Raising the Golden Virgin: Politics in the Symbolic Phase 1925-1932' thus examines the struggle between two opposed ideological factions to impose an enduring political legacy on the fabric of the rebuilt town. The physical act of restoring the golden Virgin to Notre Dame de Brébières would take place in 1931, drawing crowds of onlookers to the Place d'Armes as the statue inched up the 70 metre church tower to its final resting point. Unbeknown to the throngs of tourists- apt as they were to view the town of the leaning virgin through the literary optic of Masefield- the golden virgin possessed more than one symbolic meaning. To Albert's Catholics, the physical restoration of the church and its monument could be equated with the spiritual restoration of the town as *la Lourdes du Nord.* To the town's Radicals and Socialists, this was a hated vestige of pre-war identity, its reappearance necessitating a counter-identity which they would seek through the construction of the town hall and the glorification of *Dreyfusard* heroes in the town's street names. Reading the political debates of the late 1920s, it is easy

to become transfixed by rhetoric which drew so much strength from the poisonous memories of the Dreyfus era and conclude that despite the hardships of war and devastation, the mutual hopes and fears of reconstruction, little had changed between Catholics and Seculars between 1914-1932. But the desire by the Left to cling on to the memory of the pre-war era by remembering the ghosts of past battles, merely disguises a deeper sense of catharsis which would be made manifest in the symbolic phase.

The conclusion which we draw as to the cultural significance of the reconstruction era may of course vary; we may choose to conceptualise reconstruction via statistics which allude to the many thousands of homes built between 1919-1932; we may perceive it in terms of the immense physical hardships and financial uncertainties faced by returnees in the aftermath of war; more often than not we may choose to forget that this process took place at all, allowing the histories of towns such as Albert to fade in to the bleak backdrop of Europe in the 1930s. In this study, it will be clear that the process of reconstruction -painful though it was- offered opposed political factions the rare luxury of a mutual canvas upon which political identity could be writ-large, through which unresolved poisons from a bygone pre-war era could ultimately be drained away and rendered harmless. Given the momentum towards the magnet of political schism and civil war which gripped much of France in the 1930s, the *régions dévastées* of the Western Front may one day be remembered as a haven from a very different battlefield, one which was insidious, invisible and ultimately more destructive.

UNIVERSITY

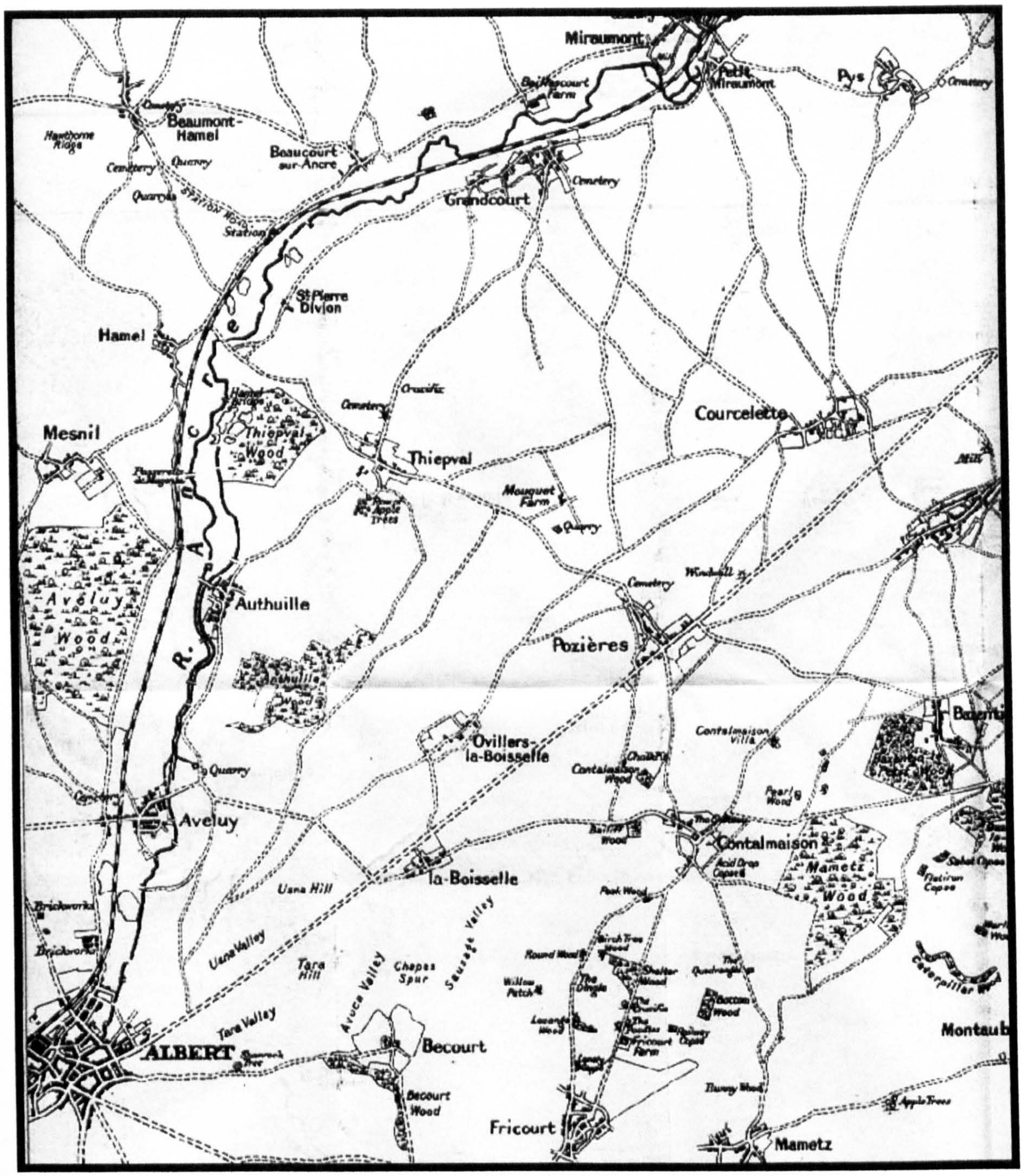

Figure 2: The canton of Albert (westernfrontassociation.com).

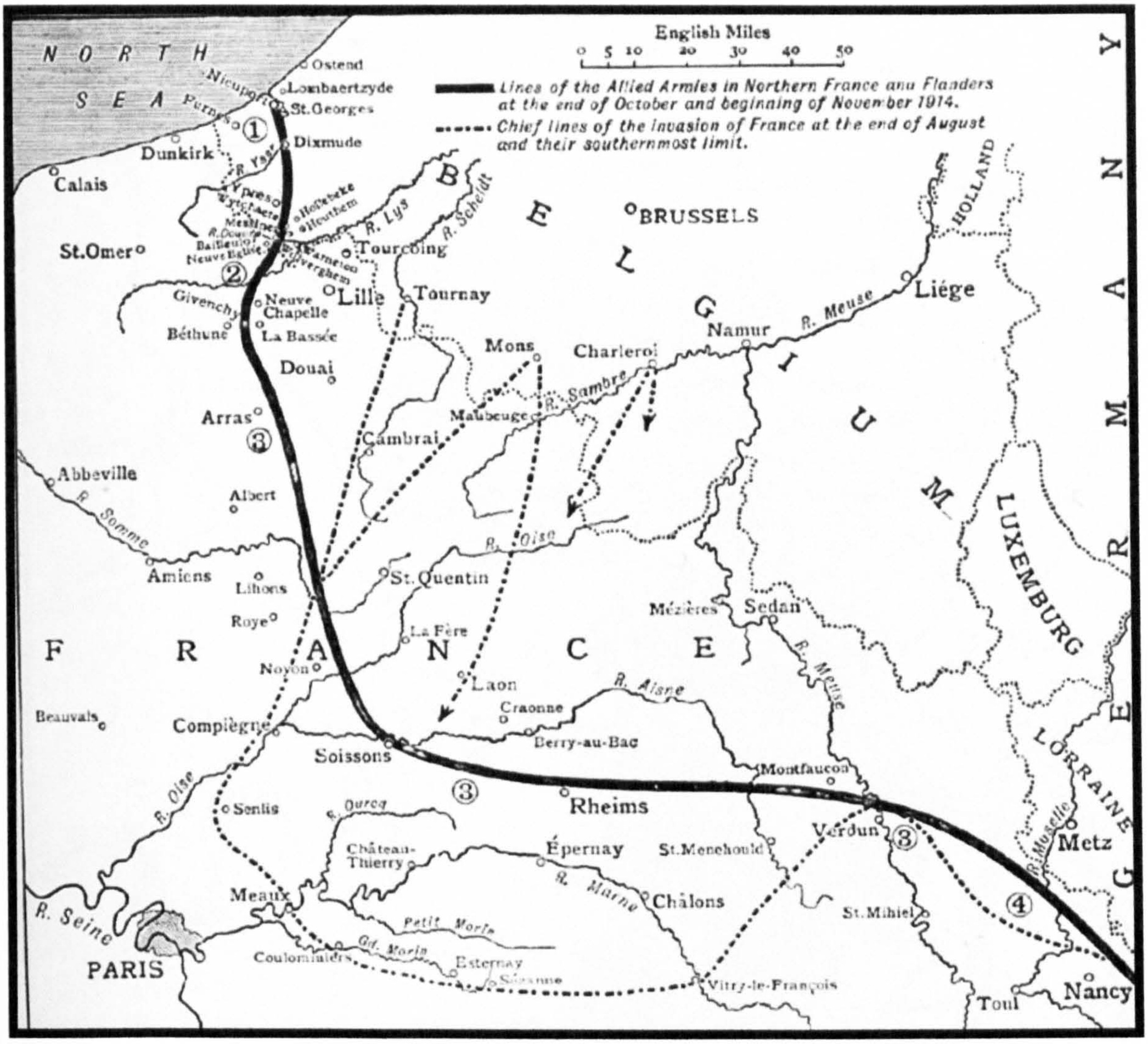

Figure 3: The front-line in November 1914 (www.westernfrontassociation.com).

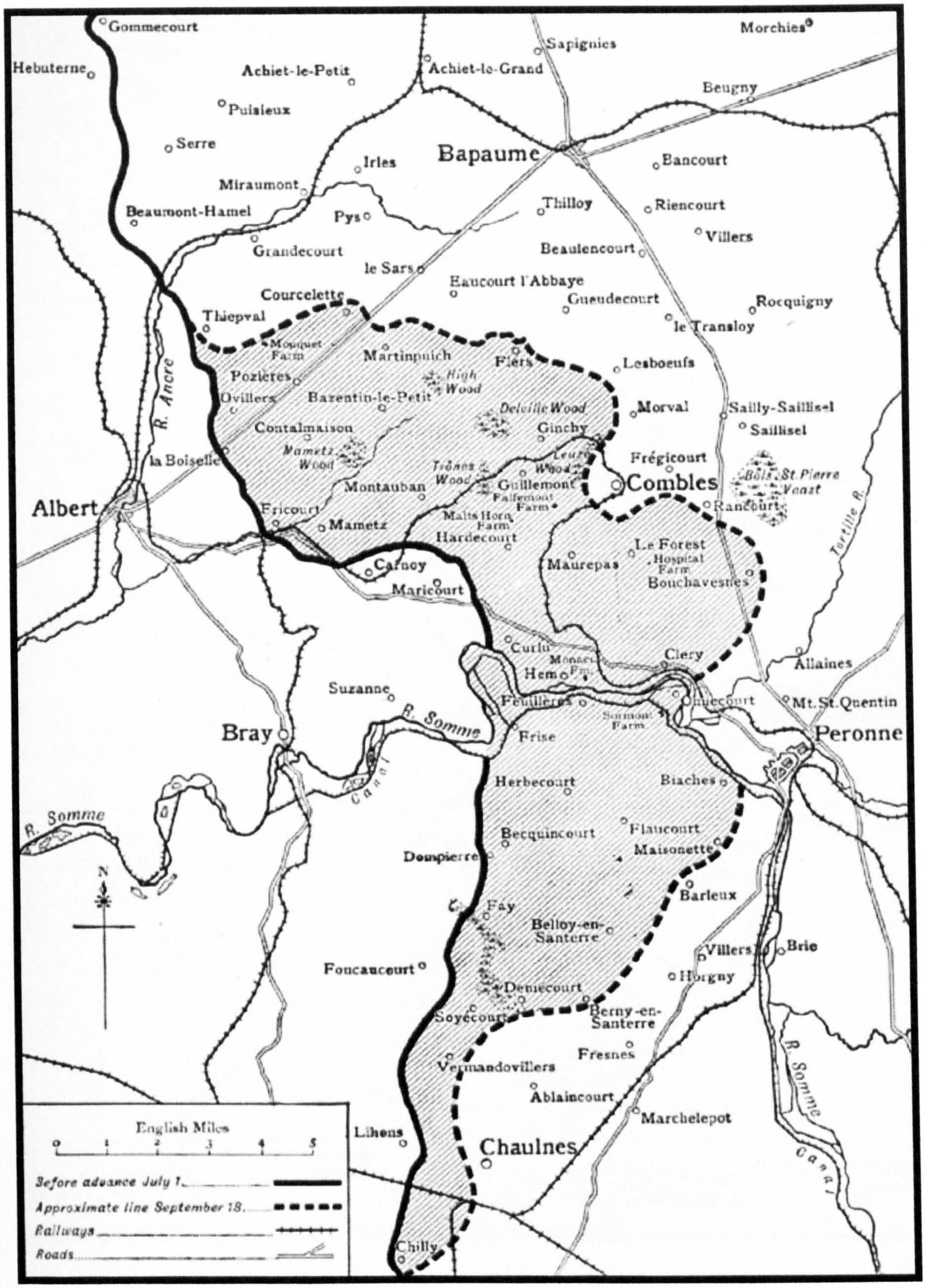

Figure 4: Shifts in the Somme front-line, July-September 1916 (www.westernfrontassociation.com)

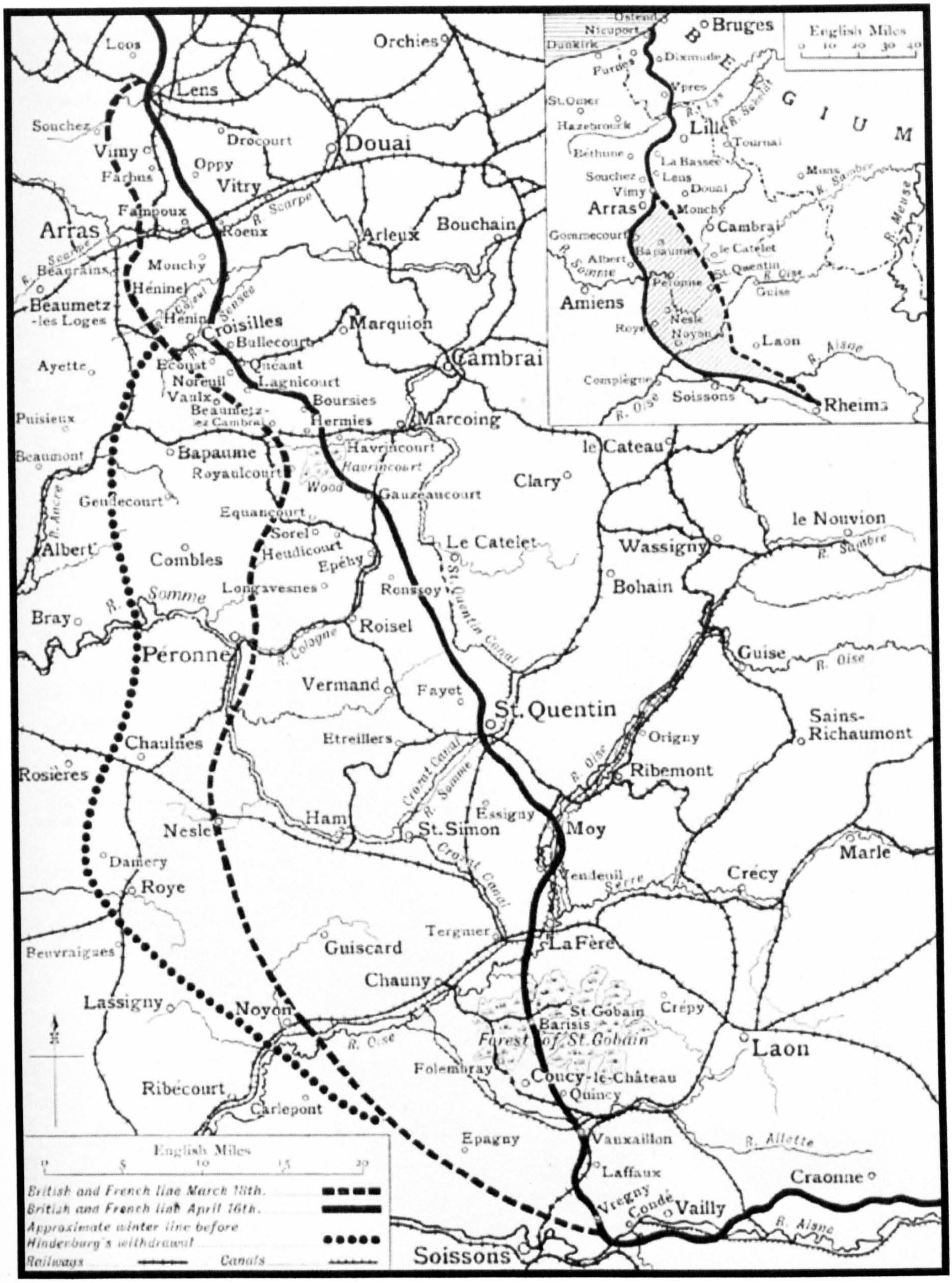

Figure 5: The 'genial' retreat to the Hindenburg line in 1917 (www.westernfrontassociation.com)

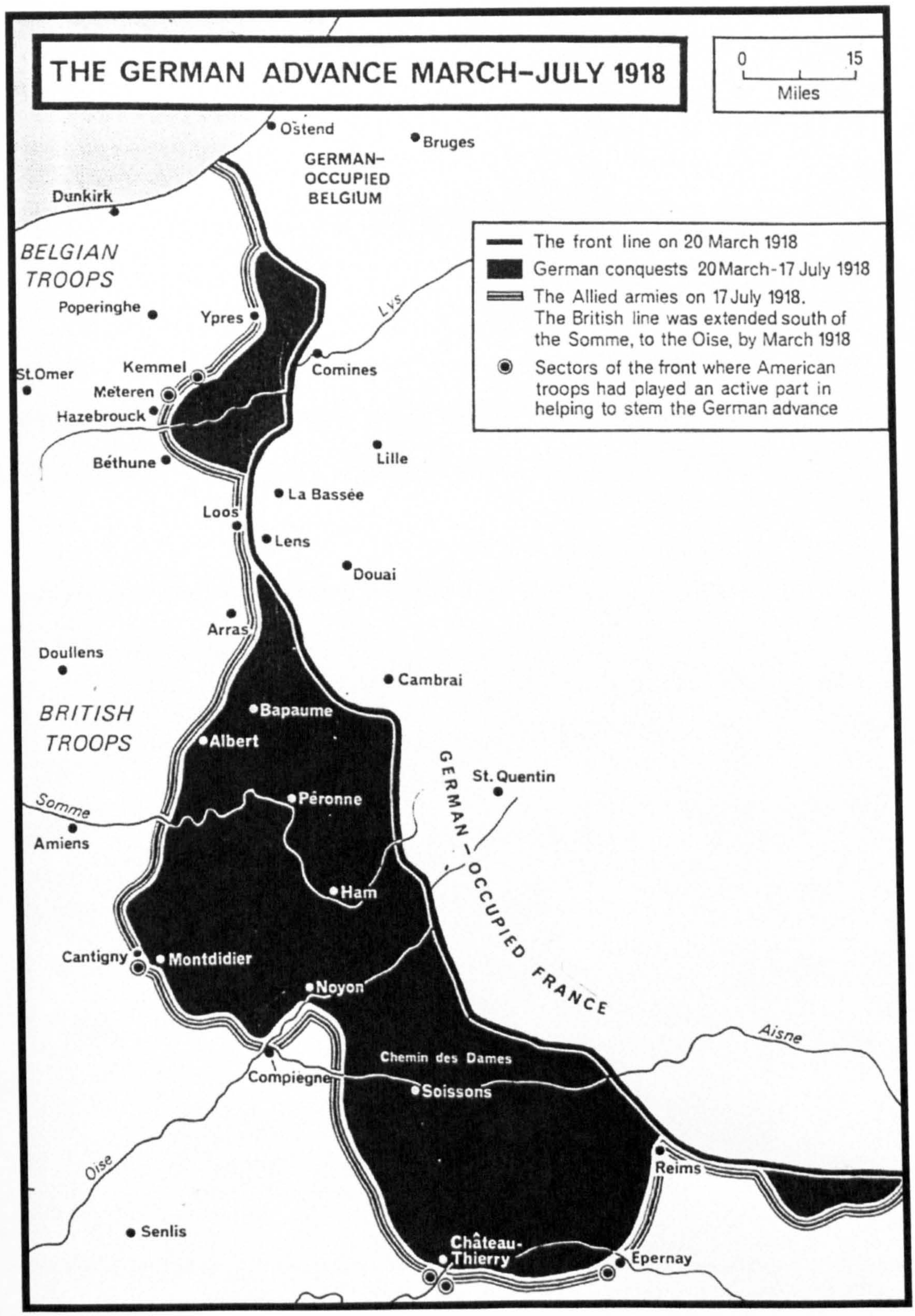

Figure 6: The German Spring Offensive, March-July 1918 (Martin Gilbert, *First World War Atlas* (London, 1970), p.110).

CHAPTER ONE

'THE LOURDES OF THE NORTH': POLITICS AND PILGRIMAGE ON THE EVE OF THE DEVASTATION

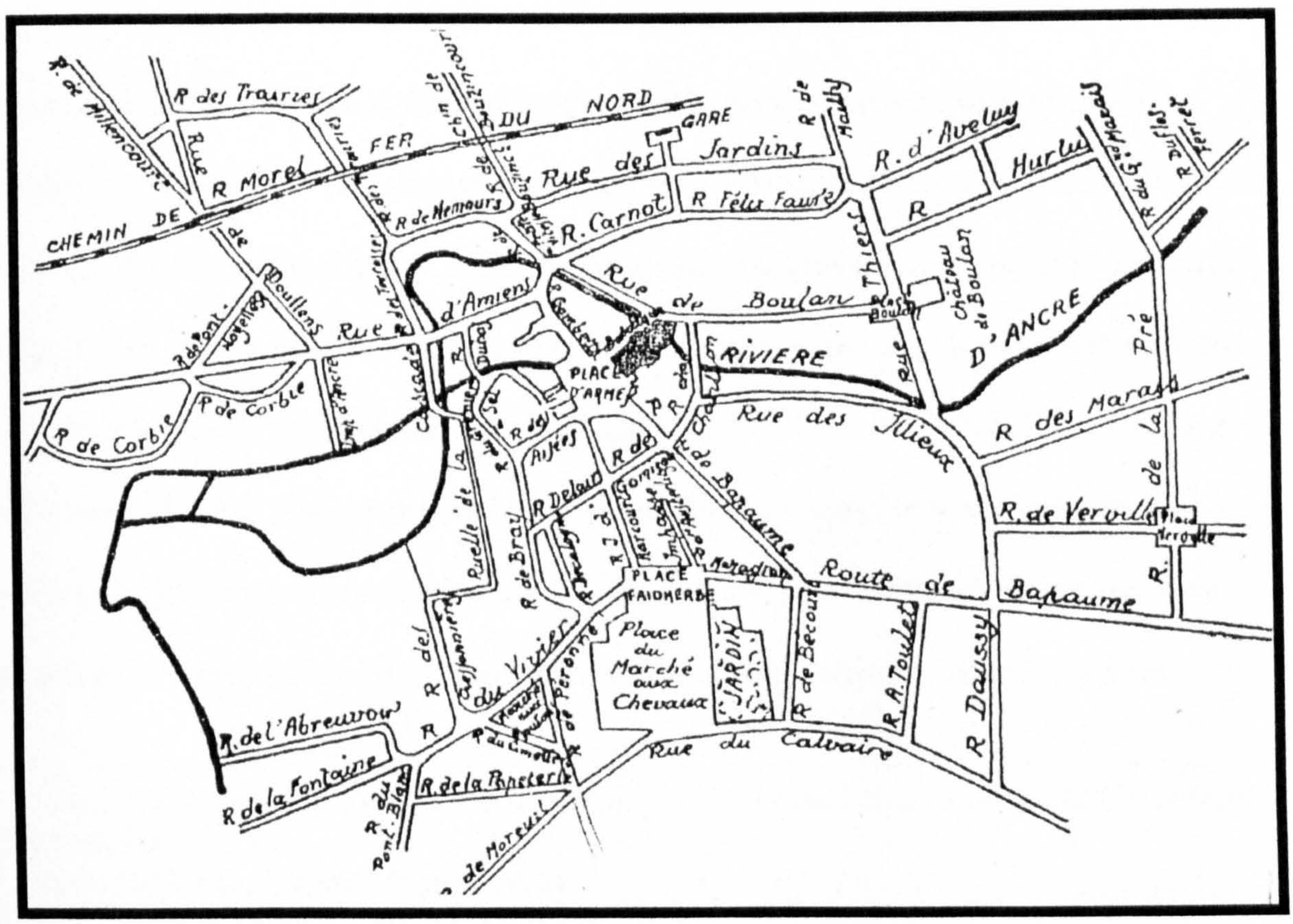

Figure 7: Map of Albert (Frédérick Lemaire, *Albert jadis et aujourd'hui* (Amiens, 2002), p.X)

Though their ideological divisions would eventually tear the Third Republic apart in the 1930s, Socialists and nationalists enjoyed the strange cement of common accord when contemplating one facet of French cultural identity on the eve of the Great War: the moral malaise which lay at the core of the nation. Socialists such as Charles Péguy bemoaned the insidious decadence of a post Franco-Prussian War nation and sought the panacea of Catholic spirituality and military life.[1] Henri Barbusse, the pre-eminent soldier-ideologue of 1914-18, embarked on his career as a novelist with *L'enfer* in 1908, by casting a voyeuristic focus upon bourgeois infidelity. *L'enfer* presented France as a nation marinating in the juices of its sexual vices and gave rise to similar feelings of cultural despair.[2] Barbusse was in good company; the chosen theme of his debut work was played out on a nightly basis in Parisian theatres where some nine out of ten plays dealt with issues of sexual debasement and syphiliphobic anxiety.[3] The obsession with a 'rhetoric of sickness' was no less central to the ideology of the extreme Right.[4] Charles Maurras, anti-Dreyfusard *par excellence* and leading light of *Action Française,* looked upon France as a nation in the grip of a crisis of identity; cultural schism was in effect, the natural psychological fall out of 1789 and its subsequent procession of 'false' regimes which had acquired fleeting footholds in the body politic, inflicting injury upon the national psyche. Literary allies such as Maurice Barrès fed their philosophies from similar distinctions between the spiritual unity of a true France and the

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[1] John Cruikshank, *Variations on Catastrophe: Some French Responses to the Great War,* (Oxford, 1982), p.10

[2] Henri Barbusse, *L'Enfer,* (Paris, 1908).

[3] Jean Yves Le Naour, *Misères et tourments de la chair durant la Grande Guerre: les moeurs sexuelles des français 1914-1918,* (Paris, 2002),p.33. See also C. Quetel, *History of Syphilis,* (Oxford, 1990).

[4] Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz, *Consuming the Past: the Medieval Revival in Fin-de-Siècle France,* (Aldershot, 2003), p.19.Emery and Morowitz point towards the collective memory of humiliation in the Franco-Prussian war as the defining factor in 'a rhetoric of sickness (which) permeated political, religious and literary discourse.'

poisons emanating from a phoney facade. In his major work of 1906, *Les déracinés*, Barrès dichotomised the French via *les enracinés* -those whose bond with the earth of *la petite patrie* and its ties of ancestry, regional tradition and Catholic devotion remained strong- and *les déracinés*, diseased souls who cut themselves off from the earth of rural France, seeking out the moral filth of the metropolis and the false ideologies of Socialism and anticlericalism. Throughout much of the Third Republic's ill-fated twentieth century history, the legacies of these writers would be ingrained in what Herman Lebovics has termed the 'Franco-French Kulturkampf.'[5]

If the notion of a 'Kulturkampf' has a specific meaning to the literary world inhabited by the likes of Péguy, Barbusse, Barrès or Maurras, this need not exclude the possibility that a parallel battle over the right to define and control France's political and spiritual destiny was taking place in towns and villages throughout the nation. Indelible traces of France's cultural divide may be found in the novels, political tracts and journal articles of the pre-war era, but the kulturkampf manifested itself visually and with equal resonance in squares and public spaces across the Republic. 'For every Marianne, the symbol of French revolutionary tradition,' writes Ruth Harris, 'there was a newly crowned Virgin, for every statue of a Republican notable, there was a panoply of Catholic saints, for every Eiffel tower, a Sacré Coeur.'[6] The final images remind us of the grandiose stand-off between Republicanism and Catholic Dolourism in late nineteenth century Paris; an architectural struggle between juxtaposed ideologies which would not find its equal in the capital until the *Exposition Internationale* of 1937. This *fin-de-siècle* battle may have been scaled down in small towns such as Albert, but only by a matter of degree and without any discernible diminishment of

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[5] Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity*, (London, 1994), p.139.
[6] Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age*, (London, 1999), pp.247-8.

its symbolic meaning. It is therefore wholly apt that a description of Albert, its geography and its contested identity on the eve of its devastation should begin in the heart of the town, in la Place d'Armes.

La Place d'Armes had been the social focal point of Albert since the town had been wiped out by fire in 1660; it remained so in the wake of a mid-nineteenth century town planning project which modernised Albert, and emerged unscathed (like the town around it) from a brief period of occupation in the Franco-Prussian war, a conflict which had laid to waste much of nearby Péronne.[7] By 1914 a considerable number of shops vied for space in the square: from the town's *annuaire générale*, we learn that 2 cafés, 4 pharmacies, a watchmaker and jewellers, a hat shop, a shoe shop, a greengrocer, a bakery, a bookshop and a maker of funeral wreaths were all located there.[8] These buildings were the modest two-storey properties of *petits commerçants*, their owners occupying the first floor and roof-space as living quarters. Architecturally, they were dwarfed by the defining edifices of the town: the imposing, oversized church of Notre Dame de Brébières stood on one side of the square, facing the town hall on the other. If the rest of Albert bore the eclectic architectural traits of late nineteenth century urbanisation, of bourgeois taste and industrialisation, the symbolism of la Place d'Armes was wholly unambiguous. This was the most overtly politicised space within Albert. Here had gathered Republicans to demonstrate a visual and vocal support of the Third Republic through the adornment of tricolours on the town hall and the singing of *La Marseillaise* on Bastille day, ever since its inclusion in the national calendar in 1880; la

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[7] ADS.99R3667, Canton d'Albert. Dommages de guerre, 1870-1. Péronne suffered the total destruction of 60 houses in 1870-1; approximately 25% of the town population were *sinistrés* who claimed compensation from the state. Albert by contrast, possessed just 2 claimants and suffered no structural damage, though the town claimed 34,112 francs for taxes imposed by the occupying Prussian army.

[8] Jean-Michel Declercq, *Hier à Albert (1900-1920)*, (Abbeville, 1989), p74.

Place d'Armes was also the space in which Catholic France was mobilised -in crowds of 80,000 at the beginning of the twentieth century[9]- by means of a procession through the town during the annual pilgrimage each September, culminating in prayers before *la vierge miraculeuse* in the crypt of Notre Dame de Brébières.

Figure 8: One side of la Place d'Armes: Notre Dame de Brébières before the Great War (ADS.8FI207).

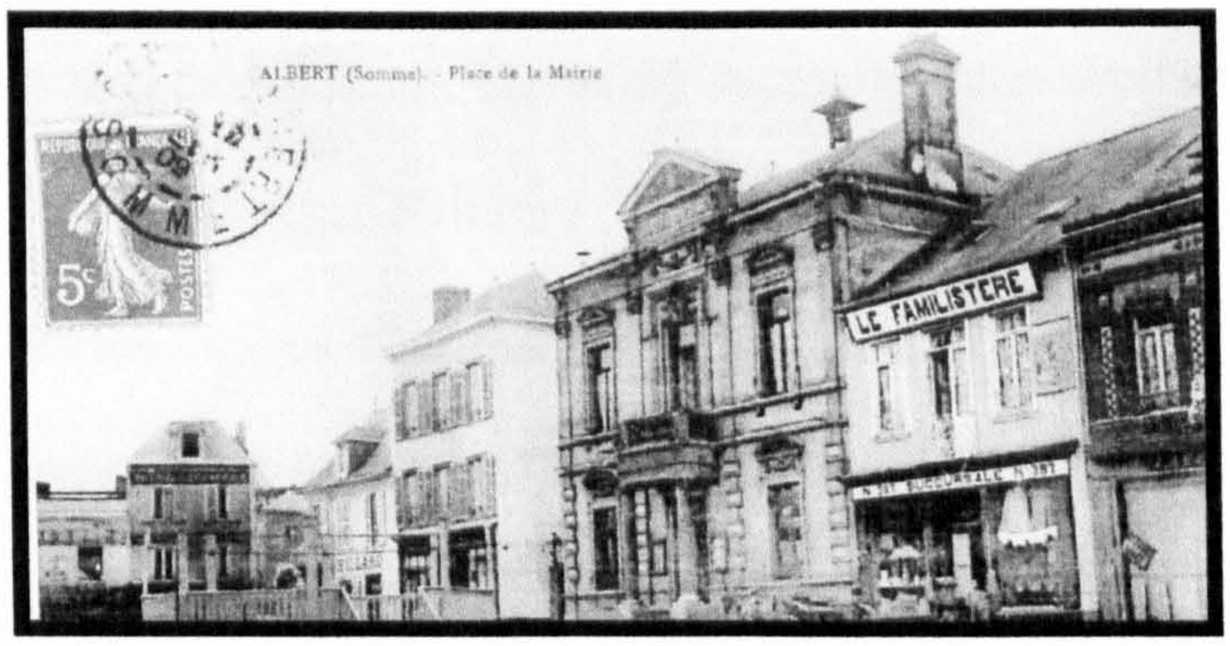

Figure 9: The other side of la Place d'Armes: the town hall (ADS.8FI2138).

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[9] *Illustrated Michelin Guide to the Battlefields (1914-18): The Somme, volume 1. The First Battle of the Somme*, (Clermont-Ferrand, 1919), p.35.

Of the two buildings, with their disparate narratives of French identity, Notre Dame de Brébières was the larger and more extravagant edifice. It was also a more recent addition to the town. Construction took place over a 15 year period, beginning in 1884 and ending in 1899. Replacing a small church which had stood in the square since 1660, the new redbrick basilica aimed to impose Albert's Catholic identity upon its skyline. It possessed a *beffroi* which was 76 metres in height, providing sightseers who climbed the 283 steps to the top with an unrivalled view over the rural villages of the canton, *le pays réel*. In keeping with the growing dominance of the Marian cult in late nineteenth century French Catholicism[10] the pinnacle of the tower was adorned by a golden statue of the Virgin and infant Jesus, which measured 5 metres in height. Forty thousand gold leaves (weighing 1 kilogram) had been required to create the statue, bringing the total cost of the church to over 3 million francs.[11] Otherwise its architectural style was highly eclectic: Edmond Duthoit the Amiens based architect, described his design as a synthesis of the Catholic architecture which had inspired him in travels through Seville, Florence and Sienna, the Islamic mosaics which adorned its facade being drawn from the great mosques of Tunisia. Though the sum of the aesthetic styles employed by Duthoit defied a specific architectural title, his hope was that tourists would find the experience of the building 'enjoyable' and note some similarities with the church of Montréal, on the outskirts of Palermo. This may well have accorded with the approving murmurs from the masses of well-travelled pilgrims who gathered at its steps each autumn, but unsurprisingly, it was far removed from the reaction of the local Republican press :

> There was already in Albert a small, picturesque church which was demolished to make way for this immense basilica, at the cost of 3 million francs. It is true to say,

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[10] Harris, *Lourdes*, p.212.
[11] Declercq, *Hier à Albert*, pp.20-29.

> that at such a price it would be difficult to have built anything more ignoble. Albert's basilica is in effect a gigantic horror, it takes up more space than the covered market and the railway station...it is pretentious and mean spirited...a vile jumble of architectural trash...a defiance of good taste...it is ugly, it is dirty and its takes up an enormous amount of space.[12]

The counter-view of Notre Dame de Brébières was expounded in a 1904 edition of the weekly *L'Union Républicaine*, at the climax of the anticlerical battles with the Church which would culminate in the 1905 law of separation between church and state. Its hatred of Notre Dame de Brébières was not inspired by aesthetic preference alone. At the core of local Republican opposition lay the politics of pilgrimage, the dynamo of Albert's pre-war Kulturkampf. Out of proportion though it may have been to the architectural features of the municipal buildings around it, or the local congregations willing to make use of it, Notre Dame de Brébières was a fitting monument to the local ambition of its *abbé* and the political desire of Parisian Assumptionists, to mobilise Catholicism in the Somme through the marketing of Albert as *la Lourdes du nord.* Pilgrimage in Albert, Lourdes, La Salette other sites of burgeoning religious significance in fin-de-siècle France may well have harnessed a 'fair-like' ambience of 'laughter, crowds and pleasure' but behind the carnival of public procession, lay the business of engendering cultural schism.[13] To seculars who espoused the Third Republic's nascent anticlericalism, and likewise to their enemies who sought the regime's demise, pilgrimage loomed large as 'one of the greatest weapons in the re-christianising arsenal.'[14]

Though Albert's tradition of pilgrimage was of a more long-standing pedigree than its Pyrenean counterpart (folklorists would argue that it was in the mid twelfth-century that *la*

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[12] Declercq, *Hier a Albert*, p.30.
[13] Emery and Morowitz, *Consuming the Past*, p.169
[14] Harris, *Lourdes*, p.219.

statue miraculeuse spoke to the shepherd who discovered it, commanding him to build a chapel on the Plaine de Brébières, on Albert's outskirts) the sense of pastiche in the midst of this conscious aping of Lourdes is unavoidable. Following the mid-nineteenth century apparitions of Bernadette Soubirous, Lourdes too had embarked on an ambitious project of church construction to signal its arrival as a site of pilgrimage and Catholic solidarity. This too, had acquired the highly eclectic architectural trappings of Rome and Byzantium, engendering a sense of aesthetic revulsion (one critic described the Basilica of the Rosary as 'a haemorrhage of bad taste'[15]) which was at the same time profoundly self-serving. Appearing on endless souvenir booklets printed by the diocese press, Albert's newly acquired epithet -*la Lourdes du nord*- had emanated from Pope Leo XIII as an endorsement of the building work engineered by abbé Godin, in the name of the sacred Virgin.[16] The national reputation spawned by the statue, the church and Papal promotion was of course far from unwelcome to the town's *commerçants*, regardless of their personal spiritual affiliation. The September pilgrimage brought the financial rewards of an 80,000 strong mass of Catholic worshippers; the religious fair of St.Simone in the following month was unrivalled in size throughout northern France, and similarly lucrative.[17] Though Albert's claim to be a second Lourdes was in a numerical sense dubious (the pilgrim crowds who converged on the town were only 10% of the size of those who travelled to the Pyrenees) a strong Catholic identity was nonetheless sufficient to sustain a considerable hotel trade, a prosperous bar trade, and for the local photographer, George Lelong, a lucrative souvenir business. In 1908, when the state had sought to counter both the popularity of pilgrimage and the anticlerical violence it engendered, by refusing to authorise extra trains and reduced ticket prices on the *Chemin de Fer du Nord*, the affiliation of local business with Catholic revival was made clear. Petitions

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[15] Ibid., p.173.
[16] Declercq, *Hier à Albert* p.34.
[17] Ibid., p.40

and poster campaigns emanated from the *union commerciale d'Albert* in which the government was accused of desiring the commercial ruin of Albert; 'two things keep Albert prosperous' its posters preached to onlookers, 'metal and pilgrimage.'[18]

Die-hard Republicans in Albert were less easily convinced by its benefits. The rediscovery of the pilgrimage ritual had clear appeal to local commercial desires to feed upon a fascination with the traditions of an idealised medieval past, but behind it lay the thinly veiled nationalist agenda of the Assumptionist order. Assumptionists in the second half of the nineteenth century were mobilising French Catholicism both physically and psychologically, by infusing it with a vision of France which was as political as it was spiritual. If the motives of the million pilgrims who annually sought out Lourdes as a social and spiritual event were manifold and complex, the goals of the Assumptionists were far clearer. By a Catholic revival, they sought out the endgame of the Third Republic and the resumption of the sacred tie between throne and altar through the return of the Bourbon monarchy. From the 1870's Assumptionists had sought to capitalise on the growing success of Lourdes by increasing the appeal of alternative pilgrimage sites in France, thus reinforcing the spiritual geography of a nation mapped out in *départements*. Their ideals were not wholly anti-modern; Assumptionists recognised the value of harnessing the ancient ritual of pilgrimage to the modern practice of railway travel and tourism. Towns across France with suitable prospects as sites of religious tourism were encouraged to promote the fact and received Assumptionist support via coverage in the pages of *La Croix* and *Le Pèlerin.*[19] Albert's pilgrimage was already a well established spiritual event by the 1860's, but the town was undoubtedly one of

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[18] ADS.KZ119. Committee of the union commerciale d'Albert to the prefect of the Somme, 23 August 1908.

[19] Emery and Morowitz, *Consuming the Past*, pp.143-158.

the principal beneficiaries of this agenda.[20] Albert's abbé, Anicet Godin was likewise one such figure whose ambitions largely concurred with the spiritual and political vision of the Assumptionists. Declaring in 1882 that his desire was to create in Albert a religious site equivalent in importance to that of Lourdes, La Salette or Montmartre, Godin became locally known as the 'beggar of Albert' for his tireless efforts at acquiring the money with which to realise the rebuilding project. Chain prayers, lilies, roses and ornamental doves were sold en masse for this purpose to pilgrims, crowds at the St.Simone fair and local congregations. The very fabric of the church -its stained glass windows, pillars and columns- was likewise 'bought' by benefactors, in return for the 'great spiritual favours' of prayers, masses and indulgences.[21] In 1898, the year in which the labours of abbé Godin were endorsed by the papal baptism of *la Lourdes du nord*, it should be noted that the political backdrop of pilgrimage had shifted further to the extreme Right, with Assumptionists in Paris scouring the higher echelons of the French army for a suitable General to spearhead a coup d'état.[22]

Pilgrimage drew upon the rhetoric of both sickness and reconstruction. The French nation, defeated and humiliated by the Prussians in 1871, morally poisoned by the blood of the Commune, supine in the clutches of Republicanism could only be revived by prayer and procession. This, according to the *conseil general des pèlerinages*, was a process of 'spiritually rebuilding the miserable homeland.'[23] The political agenda which dominated the pages of Assumptionist mouthpeices such as *La Croix* and *Le Pèlerin* extended of course beyond the realm of prayer, bringing forth a steady flow of vitriol against the Jews, Freemasons and Radicals whose covert network was deemed to be the all pervasive lifeblood

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[20] Declercq, *Hier à Albert*, p.40. Twenty thousand pilgrims travelled to Albert in 1862.
[21] Archives Diocésains d'Amiens, Albert-Ville 757/2.
[22] Harris, *Lourdes*, p.275
[23] Emery and Morowitz, *Consuming the Past*, p.144.

of the Third Republic. Through this demonisation all things Republican, *La Croix* and *Le Pèlerin* aimed to shape *fin-de siècle* Catholic identity, their editorials taking considerable pride in the claim of an extremism which was unparalleled in French print-culture.[24] In fact, the distinction between the vitriolic agenda of the national Assumptionist press and its small-circulation regional counterparts was not always so great. Nor could it be: the extremism which emanated from Albert's press, was like the town's pilgrimage itself, something of an invented tradition, manufactured and guided by the Assumptionist hand in Paris. Thus, if *la Lourdes du nord* attempted to mirror Lourdes as a site of religiosity, then *Le Journal d'Albert* (established in 1878, at the end of the 'Moral Order Republic' and the beginning of the anticlerical era[25]) likewise viewed its role as a regional echo of the anti-Semitic and anti-republican traditions expounded in the more illustrious, Catholic newspapers. In 1899, the year in which Zola published *J'accuse*, *Le Journal d'Albert* was doing its duty in offering readers a stark warning of the perilous destiny which awaited France, should it remain tolerant of the *Dreyfusards*:

> It seems that the final word has not been spoken on that dreadful nightmare which has weighed heavily on France for the past two years, 'the Dreyfus affair.' Now it is vital to establish more clearly what has not yet been explained. In fact there is no such thing as the 'Dreyfus affair.' The traitor was judged and condemned with all the legal guarantees of a war council composed of loyal officers. But the Jews wanted there to be a Dreyfus affair. They took it upon themselves to warn the government ministers of the consequences of a judgement (against Dreyfus).
>
> What were these consequences? Simply the destruction of the French social system, which the embezzlement[26] of the current regime has left at the mercy of Israelite financiers, which can't be sustained without them. It would also mean the destruction of parliamentary Republicanism...This is the reality of the situation. Today we can declare as we declared two years ago, there is no such thing as the 'Dreyfus affair' the

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[24] Charles Sowerwine, *France Since 1870: Culture, Politics and Society*, (Basingstoke, 2001), pp.57-59. *La Croix* boasted that it was 'the most anti-Jew journal in France.'

[25] Ibid., p.30

[26] The reference here is to the share scandal of the Panama company, which enveloped the Republic in the early 1890s. 'Panama' would re-emerge as a form of invective in the 1920s. See chapter five.

abominable traitor is merely profiting from his status as a Jew. There is however, a 'Jewish affair' and this poses the gravest of threats to the country. They (the Jews) have decided to ruin France, they are destroying it piece by piece. Today it is the army they attack on the pretext of the Dreyfus affair. Tomorrow we will see another affair arise and the disruption will continue, all of it controlled by their hands. If the country cannot find a government prepared to face the Jewish question with steel, the only winner will be the Jew. **The Jews or France? This is the question we face.**[27]

This implicit hostility towards the Republic (it would continue largely unabated until the newspaper disappeared altogether, a week before the national mobilisation and the declaration of the *union sacrée* in August 1914) reached its height in 1905. The realisation of a law of separation between Church and state after some thirty years of anticlerical dispute drew from the journal a prediction of religious war in France which appeared to be uttered in hope rather than fear. It declared that the inability of the French electorate to see through the falsity of Radicals such as Combes would forever render it powerless to rid France of the 'beam of freemasonry':

France, once the first amongst nations will sink even lower. The state's finances will disappear, the government's perfidious acts against the Church will grow in to open persecution and religious division will degenerate in to a veritable civil war. Religious war is what awaits us in 1906.[28]'

John McManners reminds us that whilst the separation issue was one the most enduring political sores between Catholics and Seculars, Church attitudes towards the 1905 law -a largely conciliatory piece of legislation, handled by the slick conservatism of Aristide Briand- were not always so hostile.[29] Many Catholics may have positively welcomed an act which brought the end to more than a century of state involvement in the selection of Bishops. The counterbalance was of course the Republic's seizure of property rights over religious sites

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[27] ADS.612PER10, *Le Journal d'Albert*, 30 July 1899.
[28] ADS.612PER13, *Le Journal d'Albert*, 31 December 1905
[29] John McManners, *Church and State in France, 1870-1914*, (London, 1972), pp. 152-55.

and the invasive wave of inventories which came with it. This prospect was doubtlessly as horrifying as it was humiliating for Catholics with a vested interest in the miraculous vestiges of their pilgrimage shrines. In Albert, Abbé Godin's opposition to municipal control of the church he had largely created, culminated in an open declaration against the Republic and the demand that his congregation pray for a new Bonaparte.[30] This doubtlessly shaped the pre-war hopes and fears of *Le Journal d'Albert*. Other influences of equal significance emanated from within Albert's anticlerical community. Pilgrimage by the time of the law of separation, had taken place in an increasingly hostile environment; the narrow streets of Albert being the scene of regular abuse and occasional violence as the procession of worshippers passed by. In 1903, the procession through the town had been temporarily prohibited by the prefect due to scenes of disorder created by counter-demonstrations; an act which was upheld indefinitely in the following year.[31] Though the pilgrimage continued, the reinstatement of its most spectacular public event would not be seen again until the town was rebuilt in the 1930s. Any lingering hopes that anticlerical poisons within the town would be abated by the law of separation proved groundless: in June 1907, 300 Bretons travelled to Albert to pray at the *statue miraculeuse*, and whilst their arrival preceded the tense month of the September pilgrimage, it drew a large anticlerical crowd to the station. Following the advice of posters pasted around Albert, the crowds were instructed to 'welcome the clerical vermin.' They did so by the singing of the *Internationale*; injuries were reported in the ensuing scuffles.[32] By the eve of the Great War, these tensions remained a self-evident aspect of local identity: in November 1913, it was reported in *Le Journal d'Albert* that a

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[30] Archives Diocésain, Albert-ville 757/2, *La Quinzaine Paroissale*, 27 December 1905
[31] AMA. Council minutes, 21 March 1931.
[32] Declercq, *Hier à Albert*, p.36.

mutilated effigy of Christ had been deposited on the doorstep of the offices. 'This leprosy with which Albert is infested, must disappear,' was its characteristically shrill response.[33]

Figure 10: The golden Virgin (ADS.FI173)

Figure 11: The Breton pilgrimage, 1907 (ADS.8FI209).

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[33] ADS.612PER17, *Le Journal d'Albert*, 9 November 1913.

The words 'vermin' and 'leprosy' are central supports in the rhetoric of sickness; terms of invective which come with the impressive weight of a rich and abject imagery. Such words had their evident uses in the political lexicon of pre-war France, and when the Great War finally broke out in 1914, 'leprosy' and 'vermin' remained lodged in the national vocabulary, not as terms of insult in a Catholic: Secular battle (struck dumb as it was by the constraints of the *union sacrée*) but as semantic tools in searching out and defining new enemies. Moral identity under the stresses of war, would prove wholly impossible to sustain without the antithetical qualities of a demonised 'other' to support it. Similar dynamics were at play in the ideologically tense period which preceded it. Doubtlessly, the mutilated figure of Christ on the doorstep of *Le Journal d'Albert* engendered a very real sense of shock and revulsion, but it is precisely by these events that politically driven Catholics could highlight their divisions with the secular world and maintain the structural strengths of their identity. Albert's 'leprosy' was in effect the necessary cement which held the Catholic community together, mirroring a parallel need amongst Radicals and Socialists to promote Republican solidarity by constant reference to clerical 'vermin.' This is not to dismiss the sincerity of the poison which emanated from either side; merely to underline its political utility. For Albert's Catholic press, the enforced marginality of pilgrimage via the prefectoral ban on processions accorded perfectly with a self-image of martyrdom in the midst of a 'sick' Republican town; through it the notion of a community divided by a simple Catholic: Secular dichotomy could maintain all of its desired coherence.

Was ideological division the defining feature of Albert's identity on the eve of its devastation? Clearly it served the political purpose of *Le journal d'Albert* to view the town through this optic. But collective identities, as Denise Riley has argued, rarely possess the

quality of permanence demanded by those who are driven by ideology alone.[34] Beyond la Place d'Armes, there existed the more complex social fabric of a highly prosperous industrial town, and a commercial centre which thrived on the financial benefits of religious tourism, without necessarily espousing its political motives. It was a town with a growing population, bringing with it a feel of modernity and social vibrancy which was absent throughout the rural regions of the Somme. Unlike the 25 rural villages which fell within its Canton, Albert's population had grown steadily from 3,300 in the mid-1830s, to 7,343 on the eve of the Great War. Though politically inferior in status to Péronne (the *chef-lieu* of the arrondissement), Albert was considerably larger in size. It had emerged with Amiens (the *chef-lieu* of the department) as the net beneficiary of a half century of population change in the Somme, and was in 1914, the third largest town.

The social and demographic gulf between Albert and its sleepy rural communes was profound. Whilst Albert grew and prospered, villages such as Bazentin, Beaumont-Hamel and Thiepval had all seen their village population decline by approximately 50% in the seventy years before the Great War, mirroring the national self-image of *la terre qui meurt* which engendered so much cultural anxiety amongst the Right in the pre-war era.[35] Conservative Republican figures from the 1880s such as the former prime minister Jules Méline, bemoaned the disappearance of communal life in France's rural villages, a crucial factor, he believed in the nation wide drift from the earth to the town and the dissipation of the essential elements of national identity.[36] Here too, rural Somme provided an archetypal image of social stagnation which was resonant to the nationalist creed of cultural despair.

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[34] Denise Riley, "Does Sex Have a History?" In Joan Wallach Scott, (ed.), *Feminism and History,* (Oxford, 2000), p.31.
[35] ADS.2MI_LN18-20 Census returns 1836-1936.
[36] Jules Méline, *Le retour à la terre*,(Paris, 1905), pp.101-121.

Beyond the parameters of the local bar or church, there existed little in the way of a social life for the peasants in Albert's canton. Indeed, the associations declared in the 25 rural villages of the canton in 1909 totalled just 17, the majority of them being *associations mutuels*, reflecting financial concerns of villagers. Bazentin was an exception in possessing a rifle club; so too were Aveluy and Fricourt with their musical associations. No forms of communal clubs existed in the villages of Authuille, Beaucourt, Beaumont-Hamel, Bouzincourt, Buire-sur-Ancre, Contalmaison, Dernancourt, Pozières or Pys. Bécordel merely possessed an 'association against rodents.'[37] If it took place at all, local sporting activity and entertainment in the canton was centred in Albert, with its many bars, restaurants, *terrains de sport*, religious fairs and cultural gatherings. Thirty-three different societies were declared to the prefecture on the eve of the Great War: sporting clubs for gymnasts, archers, cyclists, footballers, hunters and fishermen; musical associations (one them affiliated to the factory of the local politician, Abel Pifre; his fellow industrialist Victor Liné was president of a musical association in nearby Fricourt) were likewise prominent, as were *anciens élèves* associations affiliated to secular and Catholic institutions, and those of the *anciens combattants* of the Franco-Prussian war.[38]

Year of census	Bazentin	Thiepval	Beaumont Hamel	Ovillers-La-Boisselle
1836	239	404	833	592
1851	365	432		513
1872	300	359	566	517
1881	254	345	593	425
1906	242	230	547	342
1911	214	231	494	

Table 1: Population change in the communes of Bazentin, Thiepval, Beaumont-Hamel and Ovillers-La-Boisselle, 1836-1911 (ADS.2MI_LN).

[37] ADS.99M98023, Associations, canton d'Albert 1909.
[38] ADS.99M98023, Associations, canton d'Albert, 1909.

Year	Albert
1847	3,390
1856	3,505
1861	3,759
1872	4,259
1881	5,473
1891	6,169
1901	7,330
1906	7,613
1911	7,350

Table 2: population change in Albert, 1847-1911 (Declercq, *Hier à Albert*, p.45)

Albert was also a modern town. Local industrialists had prospered since 1846 from the town's inclusion on the Paris-Lille railway line; a second wave of railway construction in the 1880s (the fruit born from Republican faith in the political panacea of modernity[39]) brought the benefit of a local Albert-Péronne line which included many of the cantonal villages. By 1912, 113 trains per day were passing through Albert's station.[40] Its central squares and streets had been redesigned in 1848; with this there had been added an elegant arboretum, its chief attraction being the intersection of the rive Ancre, where the river course dropped in to a 100 foot waterfall. New roads had been built towards the end of the century to accommodate a growing population: by 1914 Albert possessed 2024 houses, inhabited by 2113 families.[41]

Much of the population growth had taken place in the final quarter of the nineteenth century as local rural populations sought employment in Albert's growing factories. On the eve of the

[39] Sowerwine, *France Since 1870*, p.33. In 1871, France possessed 15,632 Km of railways; by 1912, this had increased to 40,838. Sowerwine argues : 'The Republicans set out to confirm their hold on power by what one would call pork-barelling.'
[40] Declercq, *Hier à Albert*, p.40
[41] Ibid., p.45.

Great War, much of Albert's male population was employed in metallurgical workshops and factories such as the Rochet bicycle factory, with its Paris-based directorate, the Singer sewing machine factory, the French-American Otis-Pifre company which manufactured elevators, Victor Liné's metal works, Frederick Ehretsmann's iron, copper and bronze foundry and Ernst Dolé's brick works. Many of these businesses -particularly that of Rochet, which was producing some 27,000 bicycles per annum on the eve of the Great War[42]- were involved in international export, adding to the prestige of the business community, and its influence in the department's chamber of commerce. Allied to this was a bustling commercial centre. The town possessed two squares beyond la Place d'Armes, which provided trading space for 10 market days each month, bringing with it a steady stream of farmers arriving from the canton to sell their produce.[43] This in part sustained 117 bars in the town, a higher number per capita than the average for pre-war France, many of them being located in the front room of an *albertin* home, providing a second income to a *petit commerçant* . The last *annuaire générale* of the pre-war era also tells us about a town centre which was densely populated by shops and small businesses. We learn for instance the Albert's wealthier community of *commerçants,* industrialists and *rentiers* sustained 2 jewellers and 5 watchmakers; that the town's sartorial tastes were catered for by 27 dress makers, 13 tailors and 5 hat makers. Wine cellars of the bourgeois home were maintained by the services of 7 wine merchants. Though market days were frequent, the town possessed a prodigious number of food shops- some 37 *épiceries* for example, which fulfilled a similar economic purpose to many of the town's bars in providing a sideline enterprise to local *commerçants.* Most of the town's 34 butchers, horse butchers, bakers and cake shops were located in the streets surrounding la Place d'Armes, interspersed by foundries, metal works

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[42] Ibid., pp.54-5
[43] ADS.30REV77, Annuaire statistique 1919.

and coal merchants. Possessing 1,133 hectares of farmland within its geographical boundaries, and a small but politically prominent farming community with land-holdings throughout the canton, agricultural commerce also featured prominently, with saddlers, cattle fodder shops and agricultural machinery workshops supplying locals and peasants from outlying villages. In total, the town possessed just under 600 hundred different enterprises.[44] Business associations through the *Union Commerciale et Industriel d'Albert* (with Abel Pifre as its president) or the Péronne chamber of commerce (Pifre likewise being its president) thus created an alternative network of local alliances, friendships and rivalries, divorced from the vitriol of the press, or the public antipathy displayed in Catholic and Republican gatherings.

This raises a number of important issues. What assumptions may we legitimately make about Albert on the eve of the Great War? Are we to view political and religious affiliations as *the* dominant feature of its community; the *beffroi* of Notre Dame de Brébières casting a metaphorical shadow over all facets of social identity? Or do we detect the impermanence of ideology in the formation of its collective identity; ties of social class, business alliance or cultural interest limiting social divisions to the specific context of pilgrimage, procession and municipal debate, physically confining them within the political space of la Place d'Armes? The questions posed here would ultimately be answered when the community reformed in the aftermath of war, exile and devastation. We may however draw some conclusions on the cohesion between ideology and social identity on the eve of war, by considering the rhetoric of electioneering which took place in Albert in the final weeks before its devastation. Unable to field a Catholic candidate in the legislative elections of 1914, Albert's Catholic party, *Action Libérale* placed its support behind the secular candidate in the conservative

[44] ADS.191REV1, Annuaire générale 1914.

Republican, Abel Pifre. Victor Liné (the leader of *Action Libérale* and a councillor with long standing enmity with both the Radical mayor Emile Leturcq, and Socialist councillors) had both professional and social affiliations with Pifre. Pifre was a fellow metallurgical industrialist and a powerful local figure as mayor of Aveluy, president of the chamber of commerce and owner of the newspaper, *Le Réveil de la Somme*. He also shared Liné's interest in the canton's cultural life through involvement in a number of musical associations. Pifre's credentials as a Catholic sympathiser were also impressive. Though Republican, he was not tied by party affiliation and was open in his antipathy towards Radicals. He had stressed his support for *écoles libres*, and what was more, his political mouthpiece, *Le Réveil de la Somme* had been established with the intent of countering the anticlerical vitriol of *L'Union Républicaine*.[45] Crucially, it was Pifre who defended the town's pilgrimage as head of the *Union Commerciale et Industrielle*, against the machinations of the state and the *Chemin de Fer du Nord* in 1908. Despite this public persona of respectability and the business ties he possessed with Liné, the support he received from *Action Libérale* was distinctly tepid. Drawing upon a traditional rhetoric of persecution, Liné was prepared only to urge a Catholic endorsement of Pifre as a means of preventing the Radical candidate, a 'prisoner of freemasonry' from continuing his attacks on Catholics.[46] *Le Journal d'Albert* was far less inclined to bridge-building in the name of political pragmatism, and maintained its wholesale opposition to seculars. It declared that 'no one could vote for a man such as Pifre' and concluded that 'We Catholics should vote for any Catholic candidate- Republican, Royalist or Imperialist and for no other.'[47]

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[45] Declercq, *Hier à Albert*, p. 61.
[46] ADS. 612PER17, *Le Journal d'Albert*, 26 April 1914.
[47] ADS.612PER17, *Le Journal d'Albert*, 12 April 1914.

The event took place in April 1914, resulting in the narrow defeat of Pifre by his Radical opponent. Elsewhere in the department, Louis Klotz the Jewish Radical who had been the focus of anti-Semitic attacks in *Le Journal d'Albert* and *Le Franc-Parleur de Montdidier* since the 1890s, successfully defended the Montdidier arrondissement. Within 5 months of this, Albert and Montdidier and most villages in the eastern region of the Somme had largely disappeared. A German artillery attack in October wiped out half of Albert, including la Place d'Armes. Victor Liné was mobilised and Abel Pifre had taken leave of his mayoral duties in Aveluy to pursue business interests in Paris. Louis Klotz was also in Paris, where his impassioned speeches about the 'holocaust' of villages across Picardie was a feature of the wartime chamber of deputies.[48] Klotz would emerge as a key player in the initial stages of reconstruction, serving as finance minister in the Clemenceau administration. Emile Leturcq remained in Albert, but its population was reduced to less than 10% of its former level as families fled to exile in regions beyond the line of fire. Four years later, 235 local soldiers had been killed, as had 44 civilians. Thousands of German and allied soldiers lay dead under provisional wooden crosses in sterile, cratered earth throughout the canton, and nothing remained of Albert. A Royal Artillery captain recorded the following entry in his diary in August 1918 :

> Our maps showed that we were approaching Albert, but in the evening light no town could be seen at all, and I realised at once that we could not billet in Albert, because for all practical purposes there was no such place. A jumbled mass of stone and iron work to our left was identified with difficulty as a cemetery, and then as we entered a

[48] Anne Dumenil and Philippe Nivet, "Les conséquences du passage du front dans le département de la Somme, (1914-fin des années 20)" in Anne Dumenil and Philippe Nivet (eds.), *Picardie, terre de frontière* (Amiens 1998), p.159

street represented by two rows of brick heaps, in which there was barely a cellar intact.[49]

Post-war reconstruction in Albert and across the *régions dévastées* as a whole, is largely a story of how this physical debris was restored. But intrinsic to this is an understanding of reconstruction as a process of rebuilding the fractured debris of social identity; of rediscovering the bonds of friendship and enmity which defined towns and villages across the Western Front prior to the Great War. Certain elements of Albert's social identity would emerge intact from four years of warfare; others would be strangely absent or wholly distorted: reconstruction in this sense would be shaped both by the memory of conflict and the post-war risks of returning to the crutch of old ideologies, risks which were in some ways unique to the politics of a ruined landscape.

[49] Malcolm Brown, *The Imperial War Museum Book of 1918: Year of Victory*, (London, 1998), p.206.

CHAPTER TWO

'THE VERMIN OF THE FRONT': FRONT-LINE IDENTITY IN 1914-18

> On each side of the road dead Tommies had been piled...the streets were littered with dead horses, broken timbers and men lying down on the pavement in full kit just as they had fallen. Further on past a café which had been wrecked by a bomb we came across some of the remaining civilians packing up whatever they could lay their hands on -panic stricken. We are now mixed up in an endless stream of refugees- old men, barrows and carts are packed with their available belongings, girls, children and old men. Girls wheeling old women in wheelbarrows. We give them whatever assistance we can but are met with abuse and curses on nearly every side for letting the Huns come through.[1]

Witnessed by Dudley Gyngell ('F' Battery of a territorial regiment), the final dispersal of Albert's wartime community took place on the morning of 25 March 1918. Reduced to little more than 500 inhabitants, this community had remained intact throughout the German occupation of September 1914, the five month period of artillery bombardment between October 1914 and February 1915, the first battle of the Somme in 1916 and the gas attacks of the following year. The issue of their evacuation had been brought to a head by the initial success of the German Spring Offensive. Dramatic movements in the position of the front-line -it had shifted 30 km westwards in just 4 days- resulted in scenes of pillage and recrimination as British soldiers and civilians undertook a joint exodus from the town.

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[1] IWM. Papers of D.Gyngell.

The process of civilian flight and dispersal was already four years old by March 1918. It had begun in Albert in the opening days of the Great War. Within 24 hours of the declaration of war, the first refugees from Belgium and the threatened departments of Nord and Aisne began filtering through the town, their principal destinations being Paris, Amiens and the fishing villages in the bay of the Somme, which would remain densely populated with refugees throughout 1914-18.[2] In the following weeks their numbers would be swelled by inhabitants of the Somme itself: rumours of atrocities committed by invading troops in Belgium and memories of occupation in 1870-1 played their role in generating panic and increasing the scale of evacuation. Albert was swiftly depopulated: when the 72 regiment of the German army entered on 29 August 1914, over 5,000 *Albertins* had abandoned their homes, leaving just 2,000 inhabitants during the 18 day occupation. This figure would continue to diminish during the 50 subsequent months of warfare. When the Germans retreated from Albert in mid-September and began shelling the town, a further 1,000 *Albertins* would become refugees. Significant population shifts continued after the artillery fire had subsided. By January 1915, the British military had assumed control over the much of the Somme and showed little desire to share the communes under their command with anything beyond a smattering of civilian inhabitants. Wary of the bottlenecks caused by refugees on the Somme's roads in August 1914, the British forced civilians in communes to the east of Amiens and Doullens to vacate the front-line of the military zone altogether. Only civil-servants, railway workers, contracted agricultural labourers and property owners were exempt from this ruling.[3] Compliance with this decree reduced the number of *Albertins* by a further 450 between August and December 1915. Few left in either September or October

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[2] ADS.99R3138/2, Réfugiés dans la Somme. In the coastal commune of Le Crotoy, refugees would constitute over 15% of the population.

[3] ADS.99R3534, Prefect to all mayors of the Somme, 5 August 1915.

due to harvesting work at farms to the south of Albert. Agricultural land would remain intensively farmed within a mile of the front-line.[4]

Albert was not unique. For over 1 million inhabitants of towns and villages across the Western Front, displacement was a common element of war experience. In the Somme alone, 180,000 people were forced to leave their homes through the threat of invasion, the consequences of shelling and aerial bombardment or upon the insistence of an incumbent military authority. In each case the nature of their flight would have a crucial bearing upon their lives as exiles in the interior.[5] Though Albert's imminent threat of German invasion in March 1918 had reduced the process of evacuation to a matter of hours, closer still to the front-line in 1914-18, villagers had often been left with barely minutes in which to salvage their belongings prior to the arrival of German troops. In such cases, civilians whose possessions were reduced to those which could be worn, carried, pulled or pushed, were as a result condemned to a state of financial dependence upon the commune to which they had fled; for the duration of the war they would occupy a social status which was both degrading and painfully public. Typical of the endless round of begging which their wartime lives entailed is the following plea for winter clothing which was sent to the department's refugee committee in Amiens in December 1915:

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[4] ADS.6M2256, Statistiques agricoles.

[5] ADS.KZ456, Demandes d'evacuation, 1918. After the chaos of Albert in March 1918, it should be stressed that greater provision was made for the evacuation of civilians. Amiens for instance was emptied of its entire 90,000 population between May and August 1918. Trains and lorries were provided by military authorities to enable this mass evacuation to take place. Wary of the pillaging which inevitably followed evacuation, many inhabitants took the opportunity of emptying their homes in their entirety, their cargoes often weighing 5-6 tonnes. Prefectoral reports show that on one day just 33 departing refugees occupied 48 freight carriages; 31 lorries had been employed in the transportation of their belongings to the railway station, making 161 trips to and from their homes.

> Having evacuated Roye with my 7 year old daughter on 29 August 1914, and having no money, nor having been able to take anything with us as we left on foot, we are without clothes, shoes or bed linen and have no means of buying anything because of the cost of living...[6]

In Albert, Mme Veuve Machoir was one of many inhabitants left similarly impoverished by the damaged caused in the initial invasion of France; widowed in 1915 (her husband died at the age of 89) she wrote to the prefect in September 1917:

> In October 1914, at the time of the first bombardment, I was seriously injured in the leg by the explosion of a bomb and was cared for by neighbours in the town for three weeks, before being taken to hospital (my injury requiring specialist attention). Unable to take anything with us from Albert, we left without clothes, furniture, linen or kitchen equipment. Now my house lies completely empty. There is nothing left...[7]

Powerful testimonies to the hardships faced by the Somme's civilian refugees though these letters are, our interest lies beyond the realm of individual stories of suffering and hardship. The German occupation of France in 1914-18 may have directly affected only a limited area of the national territory (approximately 7%)[8], but its influence upon the social structure, the economy and the psychology of the wartime nation as a whole, was profound. Revived were the bitter memories of defeat in 1870-1, and the sense of humiliation which for more than 40 years had engendered the 'rhetoric of sickness.' This facilitated a view of the War in which the political complexities of its origins could be swiftly exchanged for the safer terrain of mythology: *la guerre qui sera sainte*- the striking endorsement of the conflict penned by *Le Matin* in August 1914, presented the nation-at-arms through the prism of heroic medievalism, striking a chord with factions across the political spectrum from the Catholic Right to the

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[6] ADS.99R3534, President of the refugee committee, 22 December 1915.

[7] ADS.KZ1053, Mme Vve Machoir to the prefect, 7 September 1917.

[8] Clout, *After the Ruins*, p.3. Though covering only 7% of the national territory, the Western Front departments contributed approximately 20% of the national revenues on the eve of the war.

anticlerical Left. Casting aside the introspection of *kulturkampf*, the French would enter the war convinced of their self-assigned role as the bastion of world civilisation; Germany by necessity, would enter the popular imagination in the role of the barbarian, driven by bloodlust and backed by the autocratic face of militarism. The war would create martyrs and engender a cult of martyrdom, with equal appeal to the religious and secular imagination. Cathedrals, churches and entire villages reduced to heaps of rubble, their images disseminated across the country via postcards, paintings and film, would provide visual proof of the destruction inflicted upon *la France éternelle* by the enemy. The same shell- struck villages were also the scene of horrific atrocities committed by the German troops as they advanced in to northern France in the early weeks of the war. Witness statements provided by local civilians to newly established atrocity commissions would furnish details of the acts of rape, pillage, and killing which had taken place, serving initially to reinforce the collective identity of northern France's inhabitants as innocent victims of a quasi-demonic enemy.[9] Strikingly effective though this may have been in 1914, this way of imagining the war- via a simple dichotomy of civilisation versus barbarianism- would prove increasingly untenable as the conflict wore on. If the international reputation of the German nation never fully recovered from the actions of its soldiers in the early weeks of the war, the moral reputation of the refugees who had suffered at their hands proved considerably less durable. Powerful symbols of the nation's moral crusade as they abandoned their homes and took to the roadways of France in August and September 1914, representations of refugees and the lives they had lead under occupation would ultimately spill over in to the genre of lurid art work and popular novels. By 1918, the 'victims' of the Western Front- as they appeared in print on the pages of novels such as Louis Dumour's *Nach Paris* - would be reduced to little more

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[9] Annette Becker, *War and Faith: the Religious Imagination in France, 1914-1930*, (Oxford, 1998), p.10.

than a titillating, voyeuristic spectacle. It is this gradual descent of the Great War refugees from the status of civilian martyrs *par excellence* to that of the nation's social pariahs which is of particular interest here.[10] Through it, we are provided with an illustration of the stresses endured by French society in 1914-18 and an insight into some of the contradictions inherent in national wartime identity.

Like all belligerent nations in 1914, it was crucial that France presented itself to the world as a country deeply committed to the political and social ideal embodied in the phrase *union sacrée*. Solemnly declared in the National Assembly on 4 August 1914, following four days of panic and political bargaining, the nation's sacred union would endure until the Socialist withdrawal from government in 1917.[11] The facade drew much strength from German atrocities in the opening months of the war, but remained fundamentally unsound. Some of the poisons may have been drained from the national press by the constraints of the *union sacrée*, but division remained a crucial element in the construct of national identity and would in time become encoded in wartime mythology. Far from simply unifying the nation under a collective ideological umbrella, the backdrop of war provided an alternative dimension through which old differences could be expressed and old scores settled. Indeed, wartime culture as it developed in France in 1914-18 appeared to thrive upon the relentless search for antithetical personalities against whom both soldiers and civilians could explore and measure their own patriotic worth. The novelist Henri Barbusse rightly observed that in war 'one is always somebody else's shirker' and though it was intended primarily as a

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[10] Ruth Harris, 'The Child of the Barbarian": Rape, Race and Nationalism in France during the First World War', *Past and Present,* 141, (November 1993), p.176. Harris writes: 'The representation of a victimised nation was often presented in terms which linked gender and religious imagery. France's plight was described as a 'bloody martyrdom' and women portrayed as 'defiled innocents.'

[11] Philippe Bernard and Henri Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic, 1914-1938* (Cambridge 1975), pp.3-4.

reflection upon the complex moral hierarchies constructed amongst *poilus* in the trenches, the phrase encapsulates a similar jostling for positions of supremacy which took place amongst civilian groups.[12] Civilian identity, and likewise that of refugees and soldiers drew coherence from the existence of an unpatriotic 'other' which defined their own moral virtues. *Poilus* on the front-line vented their fury against the mediocrity and cowardice of the civilian shirker or *embusqué* : 'They are a load of bastards...what is it that runs through their veins? Piss and drain water!' Mocked the trench journal *L'Hurle Obus* in 1916;[13] civilians of the interior likewise demonstrated their patriotic credentials through endless contrasts with profiteers, prostitutes and the refugees whom they labelled *la vermine du front*, and *les Boches du nord.*[14] Refugees defended their own status with a similar denial of a homogenous national identity. Dismissing all notions of shared suffering, the wartime hardships of the interior (*la France non-envahie*) were deemed to be inconsequential when compared to the martyrdom of their own villages and the front line heroism of their soldier comrades. As the *Gazette de Peronne* would put it in the aftermath of the war :

> We don't understand the mentality of these people -I was going to call them Frenchmen, but is this really applicable?- whilst our region was being murdered by shells, gas, and machine gun fire, they were busy enriching themselves from the war..[15]

The latter point of view, expressed in the *Gazette de Péronne* in 1921, is illustrative of the enduring nature of the bitterness which was nurtured in the 1914-18 period. If the construct of the post-war nation through the opposition of the 'true' Frenchman to his counter-type - remained strangely familiar to those for whom the pre-war *kutlurkampf* had constituted an

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[12] Henri Barbusse, *Le feu*, (Paris, 1965), p.146.
[13] ADS.99R3500, *L'Hurle Obus*, November 1916
[14] AF.F23/4, *Le Remois*, April 1918.
[15] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 23 April 1921.

ideological lifeblood, the terms on which the ideal and counter-ideal were imagined had undergone a metamorphosis. This would remain fundamental to the identity of the communities which returned to the Somme's post-war ruins. The petty injustices and insults which they had borne as refugees throughout the four years of war and exile would not simply die away; their echoes would be heard across the rubble of the Somme for the decade which followed, decisively influencing the ways in which these communities chose to mythologise their own experiences of war and suffering. None more so perhaps, than the meanings conveyed in the most common insults aimed at the refugees: *la vermine du front* and *les Boches du nord.* Vermin symbolised the abject nature of the trench; the image conjured up was one of rats feeding parasitically off the front-line soldiers and likewise swarming throughout the interior. In every sense, their filthiness impinged upon the boundaries of civilised (and therefore patriotic) behaviour. To be labelled a *Boche* was similarly injurious. It was a form of insult reserved for the suspected anti-patriot, the agent of the enemy.[16] When hurled at refugee women, its connotation was undoubtedly sexual. Like wartime military zone prostitutes, it was widely assumed that both the morality and the patriotism of the female refugee had been fatally compromised by their encounter with the enemy. To assume the role of the amoral 'other' was no doubt injurious to the refugee, but the full weight of the insult could be measured in a different way: it was the casual dismissal, and with this, the crude manipulation of the traumas suffered by many front-line civilians which would provoke the deepest and most enduring wounds. In order to understand the nature of the hatred that evolved between refugees and inhabitants of the interior, and to appreciate why in the ruins this appeared to supersede more traditional social divisions, we must know something of the war civilians experienced in the Somme. It is to this that we

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[16] Catherine Slater, *Defeatists and their Enemies: Political Invective in France 1914-18* (Oxford, 1981), p.24.

shall now turn with particular focus upon the invasion and occupation of Albert, its surrounding villages and communes situated further to the east of the Somme.

1914-15: Invasion, Occupation and Bombardment

Creating a global picture of the acts of atrocity or mistreatment committed by the German army during its occupation of the Somme requires an element of guess work. Though bimonthly reports were written by the prefect for the Ministry of the Interior, the lack of communication with villages under occupation, the dispersal of refugees who may have witnessed (or suffered) atrocities and the trepidation which many victims (particularly of rape) felt about providing witness statements, hampered the gathering of evidence. When the department produced its final report in February 1920, the prefect suggested that in all categories his figures fell some way short of establishing the true number of victims. The report furnished the following statistics: 780 civilians were the victims of physical assaults which resulted in some form of post-war infirmity; 450 had been killed; 4,000 had been forced to undergo forced labour (often this involved being placed in the line of fire as human shields to the soldiers); a further 4199 had been transported to prisoner of war camps in Belgium or Germany. [17]

Whatever the degree of its inaccuracy, the report reveals aspects of the German occupation which were common to all departments across the Western Front. From John Horne and Alan Kramer's account of the German invasion, we learn that mass executions and the wholesale burning of villages formed an intrinsic element of the German sweep in to Belgium. Though Horne and Kramer point out that atrocities witnessed on the grand scale of Louvain were

[17] ADS.99M231, Prefect to Ministry of the Interior, February 1920.

repeated less frequently once the German army had broken past the Belgian border, they make it clear that individual shootings, rapes and the systematic pillage of the villages which had fallen, remained essential features of the German advance in to France.[18] Such was the experience in the Somme. It seems highly improbable that any village which experienced occupation between 1914-18 did so without suffering the many financial burdens of the *contribution de guerre,* the widespread looting of its shops and houses or the physical assault of some of its inhabitants. Such are the conclusions to be drawn from statements provided for the Special Commission on atrocities in Amiens. From this evidence, it is possible to establish a pattern of atrocity and pillage which took place in the villages around Albert

With cases of rape, several common elements become apparent. Firstly, it is clear that little discrimination was made regarding the particular age of the victim; women of all ages presented suitable sexual trophies for their aggressors, a fact which would cause astonishment amongst some elderly victims.[19] Rapes committed in four rural communes illustrate the point. In the village of Bécordel for instance, 3 victims were aged 23, 24 and 40; in Miraumont and La Houssoye, two of the women were 79 and 80.[20] In Proyard, a 90 year old was both sexually assaulted and stabbed in the stomach with a bayonet blade as she attempted to prevent a soldier from looting her bedroom.[21] Secondly, though it was not always visually witnessed, the rape of French women was fundamentally a public act. It took place with the full knowledge of a victim's family, whose role as passive bystanders was

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[18] Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities,* p.69.

[19] AF.AJ4/2, Atrocités dans le département de la Somme. An 80 year old victim in La Houssoye suffered an attempted rape by two soldiers: 'I shouted at them "how could you do this to me at my age?" If the stable where it took place had not been dark, I would have died of shame.'

[20] ADS.99M232 , Actes d'atrocité et de pillage commis par les troupes Allemandes. Report of the Amiens Special Commission.

[21] AF. AJ4/2 Atrocités dans le départment de la Somme.

often equally traumatic. In Méricourt one woman claimed that the death of her husband (he had been forced to watch a rape take place in extremely close proximity), had resulted from the trauma he had experienced. Occasionally it took place in full view of a village. On three separate occasions, women in Combles and Pys were drugged by being forced to inhale chloroform, then dragged outside their homes and assaulted. [22]

The most common acts of rape were integrated within the act of pillage. The vast majority of rapes took place when gangs of soldiers were in the process of ransacking a home; here the status of the victim amounted to little more than the household objects which the soldiers were acquiring, the right of the invader to claim possession of both being absolute. In a typical scenario, the victim was ordered at gun point to show them the contents of the family cellar, and in so doing entrapped herself. All three of the victims in Bécordel had been raped in this way. The statement of one reads as follows:

> At about five o'clock in the afternoon, I was alone in my house with my four year old son when two infantry men walked in. The demanded some wine and I pointed towards the cellar door. One of them shouted to me "GO AND GET IT!" I had to obey. I went down in to the cellar with my child. They followed me. At the bottom of the stairs one of the Germans immediately seized hold of me. I resisted him. Frightened, my son began to cry and to shout. The soldier's friend pulled out a gun and pointed it at the child. This drained away all of my resistance. The next second, I had been turned over on to my front and succumbed to the brute's demands. His comrade climbed the stairs to keep watch at the entrance of the cellar. He took my son with him. The poor boy, during the whole scene, he remained at the top of the stairs looking at me without understanding what was happening and calling out "Mamman.!" Finally released from his odious grasp, I ran up the stairs. The second German who no doubt had similar designs on me, tried to stop me. My revulsion was such that I held him off. I picked up my child and ran across the village to the priest and asked him to protect me. The priest went to complain to a German officer about the violence I had suffered. The officer simply responded "we must all close our eyes to it!"[23]

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[22] ADS.99M232 , Report of the Amiens Special Commission.
[23] ADS.99M232, Report of the Amiens Special Commission.

Wartime rape would engender a profound sense of fascination, fear and horror throughout France. In the initial weeks of the war, when the momentum of the German advance invited speculation of a crushing military defeat in the collective imagination of the nation, the image of enforced female submission seemed to encapsulate an ordeal shared by France as a whole. Frequently personified and gendered in propaganda art, France presented itself as the female nation, *la France civilatrice*, 'resisting the assaults of a brutal male assailant.'[24] The fusion of the female victim with an idealised projection of the *patrie* was however short-lived; the collective anxiety unleashed by the atrocities of August and September 1914 being far too complex to allow it to be otherwise. At the forefront of the national fear was the spectre of racial oblivion. Widespread acts of rape by German soldiers across the Western Front played upon a Social Darwinian paranoia which had taken root since 1871 and foresaw both the eventual death of the French race and the triumph of its stronger, more fertile Germanic neighbour. The prospect of 'hordes of mongrel children'[25]- the semi-barbarian products of enforced consummation- delivering a fatal blow to France's fragile blood lines and bastardising her culture, was at the centre of the ideologically charged debates which raged in medical circles, in the Catholic church and in the national assembly. Was the threat of an insidious Germanification sufficient justification for the temporary decriminalisation of infanticide and abortion? Supporters of Josephine Barthelemy at the most celebrated of the wartime infanticide trials suggested this to be a singularly patriotic option.[26] Maurice Barrès-

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[24] Harris, 'The "Child of the Barbarian": Rape, Race and Nationalism in France during the First World War', p.170

[25] Ibid., p.174.

[26] Stéphane Audoin- Rouzeau, *l'Enfant de l'ennemi 1914-18: viol, avortement et infanticide pendant la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 1995) p.33. Josephine Barthelemy was charged with infanticide in 1916, having flushed the body of her baby in to a latrine. No attempt was made to defend the act on mental grounds. Instead, the defence case rested on her right to refuse any responsibility for a child of the enemy. She was acquitted in January 1917.

the arch defender of *la France éternelle*- likewise applauded the patriotic desire of women in his own region (of Lorraine) to preserve French identity through abortion, but argued that the anonymous abandonment of the unwanted child would be a more palatable alternative.[27] Others looked towards the maternal qualities of the nation as a social and ideological panacea. In a war constructed around the opposed forces of civilisation and barbarianism, could not the triumph of the former over the latter be exemplified by the love of an enemy child by its French mother?[28] The deeply opposed nature of racial and religious ideologies, allied with the growing uncertainties about the moral qualities of the Western Front communities themselves would ensure that the symbolism of the submissive French female would retain its potency throughout the Great war; indeed myths and realities surrounding the women of the Western Front would continue to convey meanings which seemed inextricably tied to the moral and racial identity of French society as a whole.

Though it was never systematically employed as a tool of civilian repression, the violation of women was an omnipresent feature of the German invasion.[29] In this sense, the act of rape is profoundly illustrative of the circumstances under which the German troops interacted with civilians in the Autumn of 1914. But it should be stressed that a reputation of sexual notoriety (though not necessarily one of sexual criminality) was common to both the British and the French troops which controlled the same villages at later stages of the war.[30] Some of the behavioural patterns which emerged amongst German soldiers in 1914 are thus not unrelated to the problems which resulted from the mass mobilisation of civilian men throughout

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[27] Harris, The "Child of the Barbarian": Rape, Race and Nationalism in France during the First World War, p.192.
[28] Ibid, pp.202-3. Harris cites the 1915 novel, *L'intrus* (written anonymously) as an example of a pro-natalist, Catholic response to the infanticide debate.
[29] Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, p.196.
[30] See Jean Yves Le Naour, *Misères et tourments de la chair durant la Grande Guerre: les moeurs sexuelles des Français 1914-18*, (Paris, 2002), pp. 125-219.

Europe. Deprived for long periods of home and its comforts, isolated from women, and above all conscious of the threat of early death, many soldiers qualified their experiences of comradeship in the trenches with feelings of profound isolation. 'I am alone, shipwrecked' wrote Henri Barbusse in *Le feu*, using a metaphor which was common to the imagination of soldier-writers both during and after 1914-18.[31] The unsettling nature of their alienation from civilian society, the enforced rupture with their own pre-war codes of morality, is reflected in the ways soldiers of all nations behaved when billeted amongst civilians in front line towns. Like the German soldiers, whose capacity for looting became part of Great War mythology, many soldiers of the allied armies reacted to the transient nature of their lives by becoming inveterate thieves, obsessively seeking out civilian possessions, or memorabilia from the bodies of dead enemies, through which they hoped to encapsulate their experiences in a tangible and meaningful form. Many likewise sought to affirm their masculine prowess by seeking out fleeting sexual experiences with prostitutes during their periods away from the trenches. The sheer scale of sexual activity by allied soldiers in the military zone towns of the Western Front (queues of between 1 and 2 thousand men were not unknown outside brothels[32]) would raise fears amongst home front moralists of an all pervading moral gangrene, which were hardly less violent than their responses to reports of German rape. Throughout the Great War front-line communities of the Somme would thus be harnessed with a moral identity which appeared ever more contradictory as the conflict progressed. Though images of their shattered villages communicated a sense of national martyrdom in

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[31] Barbusse, *Le feu*, p.245. Georges Duhamel likewise used the imagery of a shipwreck in his post-war novel *Civilisation* which was published in 1925. See Georges Duhamel, *Civilisation (1914-17)* (Paris,1993), p.53. Ford Maddox Hueffer described his own sense of bewilderment (during the period of the first battle of the Somme) in the following terms: 'As for explanation, I hadn't any... There were these million men, forlorn, upon a raft in space.' See Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London, 1990), p.106.

[32] Le Naour, *Misères et tourments*, pp. 173-4.

the early months of the war, the stabilisation of the front in 1915 would spawn suspicions that the coexistence of their women with all men in uniform was undermining the moral endeavour by which the war had been defined. To be an inhabitant of one of the 'martyred' villages of the Somme did not therefore invite an unequivocal recognition as a victim of war, regardless of the traumas it undoubtedly entailed.

Occupation also meant material hardship and the enforced separations of families due to deportation. Fines, extra forms of taxation, food or heavy material requisitions and the omnipresent threat of pillage by individual gangs of soldiers were all features of daily life in the communes which fell under German rule in 1914-18. The town of Épehy, (situated in the north eastern corner of the Somme, close to the borders of Nord, Aisne and Pas-de-Calais), was one of the first Somme communes to fall under German control in 1914 and one of the last to have been liberated in 1918. Many of the features of German rule experienced here are typical of repression and systematic asset stripping which took place throughout the invaded regions of the department. Like most communes, Épehy bore the financial burden of the war contribution which was imposed on its first day of occupation. German troops reached the village in mid-August. Having made contact with the mayor at 10 p.m., a sum of 9,000 francs was demanded; its delivery was initially set at midnight, but the mayor successfully negotiated a 24 hour extension and handed over the full amount to the German commandant the following morning. Rarely did the punctual payment of a war contribution serve to prevent further financial impositions. Suspicious that local mayors concealed the true nature of the municipal funds available to them, German commandants tended to speculatively increase their following demands with the aim of exacting the financial assets of a commune in their totality. In the space of 35 days, Épehy's municipal council was ordered to pay three separate war contributions. The second of these (a demand for 45,000 francs) resulted in

further negotiations between the mayor and the military authority in which a contribution of 17,310 francs was agreed.[33] Negotiations of this nature are of course indicative of the crucial role played by mayors in softening the impact of occupation, and suggest that the Germans ruled the Somme in a far more flexible manner than they had initially in Belgium, but any influence exerted by the department's mayors needs to be qualified. Most of the demands made upon occupied villages by the German army were accompanied by threats both to the physical fabric of a commune and its inhabitants. In the village of Miraumont (in the canton of Albert) no such compromises were reached over the size of its war contribution: two separate demands for 30,000 francs were made during its 2 month period of occupation, the second being issued with the threat that the village would be shelled in the event of non compliance.[34] In Miraumont, the sum was met by the funds which remained in the municipal coffers. Elsewhere in the Somme -in Roisel for instance- this was not the case. In such instances the mayor was obliged to ask the remaining villagers to privately fund any shortfall in the sum the Germans decreed them to owe. Post-war compensation claims for contributions of this nature would provoke some of the most bitter disputes between individuals (who often lacked suitable evidence of their contribution) and municipal councils. Some cases were still outstanding in the 1930s.[35]

Similar threats of violence governed the system of requisitioning. Much of Épehy's livestock was taken by the German army in the first days of occupation and thereafter the mayor was obliged to oversee a daily provision of 3,000 kilograms of oats as fodder for army horses.

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[33] ADS. KZ256, Report of the prefect, 8 September 1926.
[34] ADS.99M232, Report of the Amiens Special Commission.
[35] ADS.KZ1780, Demandes de remboursement. In one such case, a former mayor of Roisel claimed that he had been obliged to privately fund the commune's contribution to the tune of 4,000 francs. Despite the statements of three councillors who backed the claim, in 1931 the municipal council refused to make any payment to M.Trociné Pivron (the former mayor), because he lacked any receipt for the payment. The dispute had been ongoing for 13 years.

Failure to fulfil the requisition order in this case, resulted in a further fine of 1,000 francs and the deportation (on each occasion when the grain did not arrive) of an inhabitant to an internment camp in Germany. All villagers were likewise threatened with execution or deportation if they were found to have concealed private food stocks from requisition squads.[36] Deportation was not merely a reprisal for uncooperative behaviour however; it was systematically employed throughout the occupied communes as a means of controlling the most likely civilian threats to the German troops. In Albert's canton, the entire population of Beaumont-Hamel (176 men women and children) were temporarily transported to St.Quentin where all boys over the age of 12 were separated from their families and interned. Contact with their families from then on was minimal, often non existent; families which attempted to prevent this measure were threatened with summary execution.[37] In Thiepval, where 100 inhabitants had been unable to evacuate prior to the invasion, the policy of internment was applied with ever more rigour. Substantial numbers of women, children and elderly inhabitants were transported to Belgium and Germany. Three months after Thiepval's liberation (September 1914) the whereabouts of the internees remained unknown, prompting the establishment of a departmental commission to establish communication.[38]

For those inhabitants who had neither fled their communes prior to invasion, nor suffered deportation, an endless round of petty rules governed their daily behaviour and further weakened their fragile economic situations. Many of the fines imposed by the Germans for transgressions of their laws yielded only minimal financial returns, but are nonetheless significant in illustrating the suspicions and hostilities which they bore against civilian communities in 1914. In his report on the occupation of Épehy between 1914-16, the prefect

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[36] ADS.KZ256, Report of the prefect, 8 September 1926.
[37] ADS.99M232 Report of the Amiens special commission.
[38] ADS.99M231, Prefect to the ministry of the interior, December 1914.

listed the following acts as having resulted in financial retribution: failure to salute a German officer, correspondence with a neighbouring village (likewise under occupation), being caught in the street after the hours of curfew, having a pigeon land on the roof or in the grounds of a home. The prefect also mentioned that all 50 dogs in the village had been poisoned upon order of the commandant. An argument over the rate of tax to be imposed upon dog owners (civil authorities suggested that the tax ought to be set at the French level) had taken place and their destruction followed as a form of punishment. [39]

Though it is beyond the scope of this enquiry to provide a detailed analysis of the factors which shaped the German approach towards civilians in 1914, further reference needs to be made to work on this issue by Horne and Kramer. From their research it is apparent that German interpretations of civilian conduct in an earlier conflict (the Franco-Prussian war) would be central to the policies they adopted against the villages of France and above all, Belgium in the early weeks of the Great War:

> If proud regimental identities and strategic lessons for the future were nourished by the memory of 1870 and embodied in the teachings of the General Staff, the *levée en masse* decreed by the new French Republican government (above all the guerilla warfare conducted by francs-tireurs) was the unacceptable alter-ego of the nation in arms. What should be more natural than to assume that since the enemy in 1914 was the same (plus French-dominated Belgium), the war might be fought in a similar manner?[40]

Irregular warfare conducted by *francs-tireurs*, after the creation of the Third republic in September 1870 (a form of fighting condemned by Moltke as a 'return to barbarism') would thus inform German beliefs in the intrinsic treachery of enemy civilians.[41] In the myths

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[39] ADS.KZ256, Report of the prefect, 8 September 1926.
[40] Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, p.140.
[41] Ibid., p.142.

created around the activities of civilian resistants, their blood lust would be all inclusive: women and children were deemed to be as likely perpetrators of atrocities (gouging out the eyes of wounded prisoners, poisoning their water and decapitating fallen soldiers) as men. Fantasies of this nature are shown to have greatly influenced the panic felt by German troops when they entered Belgian territory and the many violent atrocities which resulted from it.[42] In French departments such as Somme, the civilian death toll was of course much lighter, but acts of violence, threats of execution and sporadic killings generated a sense of terror amongst civilians which was reinforced on a daily basis.

It seems clear that a fear and a loathing of the *franc-tireur* remained an important psychological and structural element of the German occupation throughout the four years it remained entrenched in the department. In this issue, decrees issued by the military authority during their occupation of Amiens are particularly instructive. On 30 August 1914, posters appeared throughout the city carrying a warning from the commandant Von Stockhausen that his artillery units occupied its most prominent vantage points: any act of civilian hostility towards the German army would trigger an artillery bombardment, deliberate fires and the destruction of its finest buildings. Further posters announced the fates which would befall anyone caught in possession of a gun or a more substantial cache of weapons. In the former case the guilty party could expect the firing squad; in the latter case he would be joined by the city's 12 hostages, picked from the municipal council. Villagers in the communes surrounding Amiens were similarly notified that any acts of resistance would result in their deportation to Germany and the burning of the entire commune.[43] Though reprisals rarely resulted in this level of violence in the Somme, villagers suspected of harbouring a

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[42] Ibid., pp.131-150.

[43] ADS.259PER101, *Le Progrès de la Somme*, 31 October 1914. A number of posters issued by the Germans during their period of occupation in Amiens appear in this edition.

franc-tireur, or even of failing to act co-operatively with their occupiers, would often pay a heavy price for their actions. In the village of Hallu, a woman was killed for attempting to prevent a rape.[44] In Chaulnes a man was shot for trying to escape to another village. A 70 year old man was killed for a similar offence in Miraumont.[45] In Proyart, German reprisals followed a pattern which was common to occupied villages across the breadth of the western front. German soldiers occupying a house in the village claimed that they had been shot at by a *franc-tireur* from another building. By way of punishment, the house where they had been billeted was demolished, its elderly occupant was killed under the rubble.[46] Incidents involving accusations of civilian hostility were however more often the result of friendly-fire, than genuine acts of resistance. Excessive drinking was also a contributory factor in fuelling accusations against villagers and in reinforcing the *franc-tireur* myth.[47] In occupied Méricourt where absinthe remained freely available (it had been banned throughout free France at the beginning of the war), a drinking bout in a local bar by German soldiers resulted in accusations against a villager because there happened to be a knife on the table next to him. The accused was dragged outside and repeatedly hit with a revolver. An attempted rape then took place against the bar owner, whose house the soldiers had pillaged earlier that day.[48]

Albert's 18 day occupation was undertaken by a corps of the 72nd Infantry Regiment. Though marked by familiar patterns of pillage, requisitions and financial impositions, much of the violence which defined the memory of occupation elsewhere in the Somme, was diminished if not wholly absent. In this respect, the fortune of the town's 2,000 remaining

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[44] AF.AJ4/2 Atrocités dans le département de la Somme.
[45] ADS.99M232, Report of the Amiens special commission.
[46] AF.AJ4/2 Atrocités dans le département de la Somme.
[47] Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, pp. 121-2.
[48] AF.AJ4/2 Atrocités dans le département de la Somme.

inhabitants may have owed much to those who had already departed. Underpopulated communes, as Horne and Kramer have argued, allowed German troops the physical space in which to billet unhindered by a large scale civilian presence; as a result they usually experienced a less tense form of coexistence. [49]According to *La Lourdes du Nord*, German troops in Albert committed few acts of brutality against the populace. Though pillaging took place, it was largely targeted against the homes of those who had fled prior to their arrival. The interior of Notre Dame de Brébières was said to have been respected, though the publication drew attention to one of the defining wartime traits of the barbarian by commenting that some soldiers had chosen to 'soil the entrance in an odious manner.'[50] The picture of a more peaceable coexistence is substantiated by Pierre de Laboureyras in *La ville d'Albert avant et pendant la guerre 1914-15*, a wartime publication printed in 1915. De Laboureyras records however, that one inhabitant was shot on the outskirts of Albert, following the discovery of a weapons cache at the farm where he worked. Two others were arrested as *francs-tireurs* (one of them, a local drunkard was armed with an ancient rifle, having sworn that he would kill the first Prussian he encountered) and though sentenced to death, both were released following pleas by Emile Leturcq.[51] Hostages were taken from amongst the municipal council, though none of the five who volunteered suffered the reprisals which had been promised by Von Stockhausen in Amiens. In Albert the hostage system was lax and did little to impinge on the official duties of the five. Beds were placed in the town hall and occupied in shifts. At least four hostages were obliged to spend forty-eight hours under guard at any one time. This was later reduced to 24 hours following negotiations with Emile Leturcq. By the end of the occupation, few councillors had actually served more

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[49] Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, p.69.
[50] Archives Diocèsains d'Amiens, DA756 Albert. *La Lourdes du Nord.*
[51] De Laboureyras, *La Ville d'Albert*, (Amiens, 1915) pp.47-59.

than one spell under guard.[52] According to de Laboureyras, the main damage suffered in Albert during its period of occupation resulted from acts of pillage and casual destruction of civilian possessions: officers billeting in the home of M.Picard (the *adjoint* to the mayor) were said to have emptied his commercial wine cellars and used his piano as a water trough for their horses; the bar of Madame Desplanque was taken over by German soldiers, who served each other drinks and cigars without any form of payment; the garage of the local mechanic Monsieur Dubois, suffered the requisition of 3 automobiles and 30 bicycles; Monsieur Boulanger's butcher's shop was broken into with an axe and looted. De Laboureyras also reported that pillage had taken place in the bar of Mme Veuve Richard, in Monsieur Serry's shoe shop, at Monsieur Grossel's bookshop, the butchers shop of Monsieur Wouhamet, the cake shop of Camille Langlois and the clothes shop of Monsieur Courtray Peuvion.[53]In accordance with descriptions of occupied Albert in *La Lourdes du Nord,* most of the crimes listed by de Laboureyras were phrased in a manner which invited the reader to contemplate the defining traits of the barbarian invader: the emptying of Monsieur Langlois's cake shop was thus proof positive of the 'gluttonous stomach of the Teuton'; the drinking session which took place at Monsieur Gaffier's hotel had resulted in scenes which were worthy of an ancient orgy.[54] Concluding his description of life 'under the German boot' de Laboureyras reflected that the ancient Germanic reputation for pillage had not disappeared; they remained 'the masters in this field of sport'. The 'criminals' who had entered Albert in August 1914 had 'demonstrated to the entire world, the profound virtues of German kultur.'[55] De Laboureyras's version of Albert's occupation in September 1914 contains insights into the construction of front-line civilian identity and will be explored at a later stage in this chapter.

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[52] Ibid, p.60.
[53] Ibid, pp.49-53.
[54] Ibid, p.52
[55] Ibid, p.48.

Here, it is worth pointing out that most of the traits which wartime writers deemed to be unique to the culture of German troops, were no less endemic amongst the British and French soldiers which occupied the same towns and villages of the Somme later in the war. Though their coexistence contained none of the violence of the German occupation, it is clear that in many respects the dynamics of the soldier- civilian relationship remained fundamentally the same.

Following the French breakthrough in the Marne in early September 1914, the German army began its withdrawal, moving north eastwards through the Somme. Albert was duly liberated on 15 September. The front-line of the Somme was established less than two miles from the outskirts of Albert and remained there until the first battle of the Somme (July-November 1916). Due to its proximity to the front line in this period (and its heavy usage by allied troops), Albert was a target of artillery bombardment. Shelling began on 29 September 1914, continuing with a regular intensity for the following seven months and remaining an intermittent factor of daily life until the German army retreated to the Hindenburg Line in March 1917. Reports by the Amiens police on the second day of the bombardment stated that it had been impossible to enter the town and provide help to injured civilians due to the intensity of the shelling. Later that day, the prefecture reported to the Ministry of the Interior that the town hall and some houses were on fire. By 22 October the state of the town was described by the prefect as 'pitiful.' Having used the 'golden Virgin' of Notre Dame de Brébières as a landmark (though not as an intentional target) the German artillery had hit much of the town centre. Albert, he concluded, 'has received a blow from which it was difficult to imagine it recovering.' Turning to the issue of the town's inhabitants, the prefect stated that most had been evacuated and were lodging temporarily in neighbouring

communes in the canton. Some however were intent on returning and it was proving difficult to persuade them otherwise.[56]

The precise number of people who remained in the town during its 7 month period of bombardment is unclear. The evacuation of Albert on 29 September 1914 involved the town's population in its entirety, but was only a temporary measure. Despite the destruction of his own home and the town hall, Emile Leturcq was bound by the duties of his office to return to the town and many other civilians acted likewise. Jean-Michel Declercq estimates the daytime population of Albert to have been around 800.[57] At night the population dropped as those whose houses were damaged returned to neighbouring villages. At the height of an artillery attack Albert's inhabitants sought refuge in the crypt of Notre Dame de Brébières, or the cellars of their own homes. Pierre de Laboureyras suggests that on occasions, those who were confined to such places of refuge were left without food for days on end. Civilian deaths through shell fire numbered 40 by February 1915; a further two deaths (both of them suicides) had taken place during a bombardment and were linked by the author to the traumas induced by the attack. Due to the impossibility of gaining access to the cemetery when shells rained upon the town, most of the dead of Albert remained unburied until the shelling had subsided. By February 1915 1,100 buildings had been destroyed, including the town hall and much of the Place d'Armes. The town possessed neither sufficient coffins nor the craftsmen capable of making them and buried its dead in sacking or home made wooden boxes.[58] In the *Progrès de la Somme* a 16 year old boy was reported to have built a coffin for his sister, and

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[56] ADS.99M231, Prefect to the Ministry of the Interior, 22 October 1914
[57] Declercq, *Hier à Albert (1900-1920)*, (Abbeville, 1989) p.143.
[58] De Laboureyras, *La ville d'Albert*, p.76.

with the help of a priest, to have heroically braved the storm of steel and buried her in the cemetery.[59]

In September 1915, E. Nelson of the West Riding Royal Garrison Artillery entered the town which for much of 1915 had provided billeting quarters for the British army. He found that conditions in Albert 'absolutely beggared description':

> The houses and everything was smashed and in ruins, the streets littered with broken fragments. The cathedral was a pitiful spectacle, the walls all being smashed and broken...the stays that held the statue of the golden virgin had given way and bent over under the flames and the intense heat of the bombing...and almost hangs downwards looking very unsafe and in a precarious position.[60]

It was in this semi-derelict front-line outpost, that a small percentage of Albert's pre-war population (somewhere between 7 and 20%) lived and worked throughout 43 months of warfare, until the Spring Offensive enveloped the town and forced their final, chaotic flight. Their presence, and indeed those of many hundred similar communities across the Western Front would generate myths of civilian heroism. Likewise it would spawn accusations that civilian loyalty to a beleaguered native town or village was a mere facade, disguising an anti-patriotic desire to profit through the sale of drink and prostitution. Understanding the motives of those who chose to remain close to the front, how they interpreted their own war experiences and looked upon those who had fled their midst, is the subject to which we shall now turn.

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[59] ADS.259PER101, *Le Progrès de la Somme*, 24 November 1914.
[60] IWM. Papers of E. Nelson, P122.

Figures 12&13: Rue de Bapaume before and after the German bombardment (ADS.DA756; ADS.8FI2151).

Front-line Identity

How the population of Albert and fellow front-line communes responded to the exodus of the Somme's civilians in the opening month of the war, was largely shaped by their own experience of occupation and liberation in September 1914. For over 200 communes situated in the central region of the Somme, the period of occupation ended abruptly in mid-September when German troops shifted their most advanced position 30 kilometres eastwards from Amiens. Brief though the period of occupation may have been, the impact of liberation upon these communities was profound. It signalled the end of the requisitions, thefts, deportation threats and brutalities by which their daily lives had been policed. Above all, liberation reinforced a certain vision of the war, in which the struggles of those who had faced invasion seemed tied ever more closely with the ideals of the wartime *patrie*. To have survived occupation was to have experienced a war far removed from the passive spectatorship of most civilians. Like the *poilus* themselves, the Somme's front-line communities reacted to their encounter with the enemy in 1914 by assuming moral authority over all who had not.

So much is apparent from the ways in which the Somme press sought to portray the civilian exodus of August 1914. Throughout much of the month of August, the momentum of the German advance through Belgium and northern departments of France had created panic amongst the invasion-threatened communes of the Somme. In part, the scale of the population shift which resulted in towns such as Albert had been provoked by reports of German atrocities in the departments' newspapers.[61] *La Pilote de la Somme* reported that

[61] Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities,* p.184. The panic created by reports of atrocities,

children had been deliberately burned alive in the fall of Liège;[62] *Le Progrès de la Somme* propagated one of the most persistent and widespread early atrocity myths, by reporting that German spies had been giving poisoned sweets to children. Though neither paper directly addressed the issue of evacuation from the endangered regions of the department, its message was nonetheless clear: the arrival of German troops in the Somme threatened to terrorise and destroy families and local communities throughout the department. The act of flight thus presented itself as something of a familial obligation. It was in the days which followed the French successes in the Marne that the tone of the press underwent a significant transformation. As the Germans prepared to withdraw from Amiens on September 12, *Le Réveil de Picardie* drew its readers' attention to the civilians who had absented themselves from the city prior to its occupation. Far from maintaining a sense of unspoken legitimacy (as a patriotic defence of the family), the act of flight from the Somme was deemed to have been that of the coward. Inevitably, the accusation of cowardice was politically motivated and was therefore also selective. Thus in the eyes of the Socialist *Rèveil de Picardie*, the 'yellow bellies' who had departed Amiens belonged to the city's bourgeoisie. They had left, not by foot but by automobile, speeding off to the most distant corners of France. In so acting, they had negated whatever veneer of social respectability they may have possessed prior to the war:

> Over the last two weeks we have been watching an exodus of the rich towards the most distant corners of France, fleeing from the advance of the Germans. We have seen them acting on the word of the most stupid rumours, abandoning their homes in their automobiles in order to place as much ground between the invaders and their precious selves. These yellow bellies have given us a clear indication of their cowardice and their selfishness. From now on, their attempts to instruct us in civic

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lead the minister of war, Millerand to place a ban (in mid-September 1914) on 'the publication of stories, which by terrifying the population run the risk of provoking the most deplorable exodus.'

[62] ADS.255PER35, *La Pilote de la Somme*, 8 August 1914.

duty will not be well received. We will simply reply: "Where were you when the cannons were firing on Amiens? as the German advance cut through the region? As our sons were falling in the battlefields in order to defend your properties?"[63]

The vitriolic language of *Le Réveil de Picardie* is not untypical of post-Marne responses to civilian exodus; in fact the unmasking of the civilian (invariably bourgeois) *embusqué* through the act of flight from invasion (either real or imagined) would emerge as one of the most persistent literary tropes in wartime culture.[64] Unmanly, selfish and wholly indifferent to *la guerre sainte*, the *embusqué* performed a crucial role in shoring up the fractious construct of the *union sacrée*. In exposing individuals as *embusqués,* writers could underscore the cement which held true patriots together as a spiritual unity. The ploy of 'outing' the anti-patriot appears for instance in Roland Dorgelès's *Les croix de bois* when the home of a notary ('who judged it prudent to run away to the other end of the country'[65]) is pillaged by embittered *poilus*; it forms the climax of Paul Margueritte's novel *L'embusqué* when the archetypal coward flees the imagined dangers of Paris for the safety and sun of St. Jean-de-Luz.[66] Both authors were using a stilted portrayal of the civilian evacuee to provide focus to their own examinations of what constituted 'correct' wartime behaviour.

In the Somme, collective finger pointing at the civilian *embusqué* likewise served the purpose of defining all that was admirable amongst the department's remaining front-line inhabitants. Here, the political dimension was clearer: denunciation provided public figures with an opportunity to settle political scores with absent rivals and to re-establish their own reputations in the aftermath of occupation. Such are the conclusions to be drawn from the prefect's report for the Ministry of the Interior in October 1914. Here, the prefect announced

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[63] ADS.264PER7 *Le Réveil de Picardie*, 12 September 1914.
[64] Slater, *Defeatists and their Enemies: Political Invective in France 1914-18*, p.18.
[65] Roland Dorgelès, *Les croix de bois* (Paris, 1919), p.11.
[66] Paul Margueritte, *L'embusqué* (Paris, 1916), p.255.

his decision to sack a number of mayors whom he considered to have failed in their patriotic duty. The tone of the report was of course more measured than the journalistic excess of *La Pilote de la Somme*, but an element of bravado more readily associated with the *poilus* than a politician ensconced 30 kilometres behind the trenches, is nevertheless discernible. Particular targets of his displeasure were mayors in Roye, Rosières, Aveluy, Authuille and Méaulte. The mayor of Rosières was labelled a 'recidivist' for having twice left his commune in the opening weeks of the war. His offer of resignation was rejected in favour of a more public humiliation through dismissal. In Albert's canton, Abel Pifre -enemy of the anticlericals- was likewise condemned for placing war profits above loyalty to his endangered commune of Aveluy: Pifre's pre-war business interests had been tied between the Somme and Levalois, and in August 1914 he had sacrificed his public office in Aveluy to pursue war contracts from his base in the suburbs of Paris. In the neighbouring commune of Authuille, the prefect conceded that enemy trenches (constructed around Thiepval) were extremely close to the edge of the village, but this alone was an inadequate reason for the sudden departure of its mayor, Monsieur Dillocourt. Concluding that Authuillle had suffered little from artillery fire, the prefect suggested that it was the mayor's duty to stand firm in his commune of office with the remaining 12 inhabitants 'until the very last moment.'[67] Those who had refused to flee with the mayor survived in 'lamentable material conditions' for a further seven months, depending largely on the charity of the French soldiers stationed there.[68] Criticisms for a lack of *sang-froid* also extended to local village teachers in Albert's canton. Two teachers from the villages of Aveluy and Méaulte were sacked for their sudden departures. In Méaulte the teacher (who was also the secretary to an absent and similarly disgraced mayor, the

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[67] 432 inhabitants of Aveluy (approximately 97% of the village's population) had already departed when the mayor decided to flee.

[68] ADS.99O448, Authuille. Authuille's inhabitants were removed from the village in the Summer of 1915 as part of a general policy by the British of emptying the Somme's front-line communes.

industrialist Henri Potez) was derided for having fled the commune 'at the first sound of the cannon.'[69]

Politically self-serving though the report may have been, it also reflected the problems created by absentee mayors in 1914. Those who had failed to remain at their posts when invasion threatened their communes in August, had invariably provoked the subsequent departure of their village's remaining inhabitants. This had placed an increasing strain upon northern France's principal areas of refuge which at the time of the report in October 1914 were almost exclusively situated around Amiens, Paris and the uninvaded regions of Pas-de-Calais.[70] In Amiens, the refugee problem became acute within days of the declaration of war and remained so in the period following its occupation. Nearing its saturation point in October 1914, the mayor had been forced to announce that future arrivals from invaded or threatened communes would no longer be granted refuge in the city; they would instead be taken to the prefecture and transferred to an alternative department in the interior.[71] Pressure to close the city gates in 1914 is likely to have emanated from the French army occupying the Somme, whose anxieties were from the start of the war, based less around housing or food shortages within the city, than the impediments which fleeing civilians posed to military traffic on the roads around the front line. Thus, as the Germans advanced towards Albert and Amiens in late August 1914, the prefect had been urged by the French military to maintain 'a

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[69] Henri Potez left his village on 25 August, 4 days before the Germans invaded

[70] This remained the case for the first two years of the war. By May 1916, the Ministry of the Interior estimated that almost 1 million people were refugees. Its statistics revealed the profound imbalance of their dispersal across France. Whilst Paris and its *banlieue* housed a large proportion of refugees, few department to the south did likewise: the 348 refugees from Nord and Pas-de-Calais living in Ardèche contrasts sharply with the 92,000 concentrated in two arrondissements of Pas-de-Calais.

[71] ADS.259PER101, *Le Progrès de la Somme*, 27 October 1914. The measure was temporary. Once the front line had stabilised in the Somme, Amiens was once again a target for refugees. Between February 1915 and September 1917 the number of refugees in the city increased from 1,823 to 9,646.

strong line in order to keep the population in its communes. At certain junctions, their exodus would create considerable problems for the execution of military operations.'[72] In communes around Montdidier, the policy had been implemented at a considerable cost. Villagers expressed their 'fury and astonishment' that formal orders to evacuate had not been given by either military or civil authorities. As a consequence, their *sous-préfet* reported that elderly and infirm members of their communities had been unable to escape. Some he believed, had been killed during the shelling of the villages. Amongst those who had been able to evacuate prior to the arrival of German troops, no opportunity had been afforded to salvage possessions from their homes before they were set ablaze.[73]

In the specific case of Albert , our interpretation of how the town's population wished to be viewed by civilians living beyond the military zone is aided through reference to Pierre de Laboureyras's *La ville d'Albert pendant le Grande Guerre 1914-15.* History books of this nature which recounted the hardships and heroism of individual towns along the Western Front were a popular form of wartime and post-war literature. In the Somme, each of the principal towns which had suffered from occupation or bombardment (Amiens, Doullens, Montdider and Péronne) would be served by parallel works. These were not the day-to-day eye witness accounts scribbled in journals by local inhabitants, but officially sanctioned wartime monographs. Writers such as de Laboureyras would have first required authorisation from the prefecture in Amiens. His subsequent research was reliant on access to records of the mayor's wartime correspondence (Albert's archives were situated in a brick factory after the loss of the town hall) and was thus heavily influenced by the Leturcq's own political

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[72] ADS.KZ332/1, Commander in chief to prefect, 29 August 1914.
[73] ADS.99M231, *Sous-préfet* to the prefect, 18 October 1914.

convictions. As such, the decision to allow Pierre de Laboureyras to write about Albert in 1914-15 provided the mayor and his political allies with an opportunity to enhance their own reputations and to advertise their doubts over the patriotic credentials of absent rivals. The opportunity was not missed. Political adversaries such as the pre-war *sous-préfet* of Peronne were derided for their cowardice. When the *sous-préfet* abandoned the Somme in August 1914 (inevitably de Laboureyras commented that this was 'at the first sound of the cannon') he did so whilst singing *la ballade de l'embusqué.*[74] In contrast, the mayor himself was presented as a man whose desire to fight alongside the *poilus* (at the age of 44) had been tempered only by the recognition that his first loyalty lay with the town and the community of Albert. Similar convictions that loyalty to the native region should override all concerns for personal safety were shared by the redoubtable Mme Leturcq (who resisted all requests that she leave the town prior to the German invasion) and Leturcq's principal Radical allies on the council, Ernest Dolé, Dr.Verrier and M.Reimann. But the overriding tone of the work was tempered by the constraints of *union sacrée.* Though Leturcq's pre-war battles with local Catholics had been writ-large in *Le Journal d'Albert*, here Catholics and Seculars lived in patriotic harmony. Catholic figures such as M.Picard, Denis-Dumeige, Oscar Lefèbvre, and M.Boulanger- Daussy all featured in the book and were accorded a degree of respect. The tragedy which had befallen Notre Dame de Brébières also merited extensive contemplation and formed a dominant backdrop to de Laboureyras's descriptions of the town's ruins. It was in exploring the social make up of the community which had shown the most enduring loyalty to the ruins that the political flavour of the work became more overt. The town's own *embusqués* -weak willed *Albertins* who had flooded towards the railway station in August 1914 (whilst being harangued by the mayor for their failure to stand firm)- were composed of rentiers, factory owners and the town's wealthier inhabitants. Those who chose to remain in

[74] De Loubourey ras, *La ville d'Albert,* p.61.

the front-line had only an emotional stake in the defence of the *petit patrie*; they were 'those who possessed the least. Many amongst them did not even own the homes they insisted on remaining in.' [75]

Though leftist in tone, the ideological appeal of the work reached out to a wider audience. Pierre de Laboureyras's principal theme -that of a community which doggedly refused to relinquish its regional ties in the face of hardship- was in fact fundamental to a vision of France which was shared across the political spectrum. His descriptions of life in the town under occupation presented an image of stoic acceptance rather than active hostility, and yet a certain concept of resistance underlies the entire work and would have been apparent to all of his readers. It is therefore worth considering de Laboureyras's work through reference to the ideological crisis which had gripped intellectuals on both the left and the right in the decade prior to the war. Writers who defined 1914 as the unleashing of a *guerre moralisatrice* -and they were many[76]- based their faith on the belief that bloodletting on the Western Front would inspire the regeneration of a nation which had submitted to a fin-de-siècle decadence. Their morbid fascination with notions of national decay and degeneration had been played out through the contemplation of urban life and the moral poverty of its rootless inhabitants. On the Left, Barbusse's 1908 work *l'enfer* used a series of soulless sexual entanglements to suggest that human existence had been rendered virtually meaningless by the falsities of modern bourgeois society.[77] On the Right, writers such as Maurice Barrès and Jules Méline (the latter a former Prime Minister) looked upon the growth of the modern metropolis as the death of the French race. For Barrès the abandonment of

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[75] Ibid., p.92.
[76] See Le Naour, *Misères et tourments*, chapters 1&2.
[77] Barbusse, *L'enfer*, (Paris, 1908). Barbusse's novel is discussed by Frank Field, in *Three French Writers and the Great War: Studies in the Rise of Communism and Fascism* (Cambridge, 1975), pp31-32.

one's native soil (the act of becoming rootless, or *déraciné*) was an act of self destruction, ending in anonymity amidst the alcoholic filth of the city.[78] Méline's perception of rural depopulation was similarly apocalyptic. Peasants who deserted the native soil were 'lost sheep' who through their own moral weakness (Méline felt this to be particularly so of young rural women) had been 'seduced' by the attractions of the city.[79] It is in this context of chronic national self doubt that de Laboureyras's work acquires its meaning. As a manufacturing town with a Radical mayor and a predominantly anticlerical council, Albert may have been an improbable choice as a symbol of *la France éternelle*, but de Laboureyras's portrayal of its community was in some ways profoundly Barrèsian. To those who viewed the nation's moral ills as stemming from its flood of *déracinés* abandoning the earth for the city, his portrayal of the community as *les indéracinables* was deeply significant. Not only did this epitomise their courage in the face of invasion and bombardment, it implied a steadfast refusal to relinquish the ancestral bond with the native soil. To those swayed by sentimental regionalist visions of France, this in itself was a credible form of resistance to the forces deemed to be threatening the soul of the nation. As such it demanded parity with the moral worth of the *poilus*.

Behind the facade of collective solidarity in the front-line, with its strikingly universal appeal, there existed a fragmented community of solitary individuals. Their principal motivation for remaining in the town was inspired less by notions of regional or community loyalty, than by fear. Their fear was of pillage. Whilst German acts of pillage in the Somme merited the constant attention of the department's press ('the cursed race' was driven to such acts by Wotan's promises of favour in Walhalla, wrote the *Pilote de la Somme* in 1914[80])

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[78] Barrès, *Les déracinés,* (Paris, 1988), p.100.
[79] Jules Méline, *Le retour à la terre*, (Paris, 1905), pp. 101-121
[80] ADS.255PER35 *La Pilote de la Somme*, 15 October 1914. Their report went as follows:

equivalent acts of theft by allied troops (save for those carried out by colonials) received no reportage at all.[81] It is clear though that the attitudes of all armies towards civilian property and possessions were remarkably similar. Fear of pillage would therefore be a decisive factor in determining the size and make up of Albert's population both during the German occupation and the 39 months of British control which followed. As there was no wartime census in France, our knowledge of Albert's inhabitants is limited to documents listing departures from the town and changes of address within it. But it is clear that few families remained intact throughout 1914-18. Most would opt to evacuate and leave a sole representative behind to guard their home and possessions. For example, Adam Frédéric (a music teacher), had lived with his family of four on Rue d'Amiens prior to the outbreak of the war. In 1917, when he moved his remaining belongings from his bombed home to an empty building on Rue d'Aveluy, he was the sole remaining family member. His wife and daughter were by this time refugees in the interior and his son was mobilised. Ernest Boulanger is recorded as having moved from the destroyed Rue de Marais to a 'secure property' with household possessions and ovens from the family bakery business. He too was the sole representative from a family of eight. Two of his sons had been mobilised, the rest of the family had been evacuated. Marie Bellard lived alone on the Rue Cressonier; Mme Bertoux (with a pre-war family of four) lived likewise on the Rue d'Amiens. Monsieur Bellard (no relation of Marie) was similarly a single occupant of his home on Rue Dubos.

'Wilhelm's God is derived from a more ancient cult than that of Christianity, Buddhism or Islam. His God is that of the barbarian hordes who lived in a state of savagery. It is Wotan, the terrible Germanic divinity in the honour of whom, the Germans **slit the throats of the vanquished**; Wotan whose heaven is called Walhalla...' Millerand's call for strict censorship on atrocity reportage in September 1914 was thus short-lived. Once the front-line had stabilised and the threat to Paris had diminished, atrocities emerged as the principal propaganda tool in the national press.

[81] ADS.259PER101, *Le Progrès de la Somme*, 20 October 1918. It was reported that a group of 'Kabyles' who had been employed in rubble clearance from the Palais de Justice in Amiens, had taken the opportunity of looting the personal effects of the city's magistrates.

The possessions he was able to salvage from its wreckage in 1917 amounted to little more than a fire place, some of the roof tiles which had remained intact and his personal possessions.[82] Examples of fragmented family ties are repeated throughout the wartime community and shed a different light upon the myths which presented Albert's population as *les indéracinables.* For many, the presence of British troops left them little option other than remaining in the military zone.

Their fears were not unfounded. In Albert and much of the liberated zone of the Somme, pillage was commonplace throughout the British period of control.[83] During the evacuation of Amiens for example, it was reported that British soldiers had targeted empty houses in the outlying communes of Boves, Longueau and Gagny; kicking down their doors, they had claimed any possessions that they could carry with them (mainly food, drink, clothes and shoes). Despite its state of almost total depopulation, thirty-two extra gendarmes were transferred to Amiens (prior to the arrival of British troops), simply to protect its homes from further acts of pillage.[84] In villages around Albert, empty homes (those of deceased civilians for example) had likewise required extra surveillance throughout the war. Following the death of Philippine Diot in Dernancourt, the most valuable items in her home were immediately stored with the *greffier* in Albert, until they could be claimed by her legitimate heir. The necessity of speed in this case was due less to the proximity of Dernancourt to the line of fire (it was less than 3 miles away at the time of her death in 1915) than the presence

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[82] ADS.10R25, Autorisations de déménagements, 1915-17.

[83] This included the final morning in Albert. When British troops withdrew on 25 march 1918, the journal of one soldier simply states: 'Left Albert taking champagne etc. Looting shops.' IWM. Papers of M.Blow 99/231

[84] As a result of their indiscipline, British troops were banned from billeting in the city centre. In the final months of the war, this was a frequent occurance.A.E. Hodgkin (5th Battalion, Cheshire Regiment) in his journal records that British troops had been banned from Cambrai in October 1918 'in order to prevent further looting.' IWM. Papers of A.E.Hodgkin, 1/1-5.

of 150 soldiers billeted in her neighbourhood. Theoretically, the punishment for pillage was harsh. In Albert one British soldier was in fact executed for his role in the ransacking of a civilian home. This case aside however, surveillance of soldiers appears to have been lax and punishments inconsistently applied. When S.T. Eachus (a signalman in the Royal Engineers) discussed 'plunder fever' with his captain, he was warned of the possible consequences, but simply reflected that 'life without risk would be unbearable...all is fair in war they say.' He later added that 'an honest man in civilian life is often a criminal in the army.' His own personal haul of war trophies was considerable. In his journal he recorded having acquired the following items from a home:

> About 15 volumes of Mémoires sur Napoleon...I got hold of a drawer and filled it to the utmost with these treasures. Among them I discovered an album which was filled with private photographs. This is forsooth a 'très bon souvenir' but oh how I wish that it were possible to get them all safely over to England.'[85]

To provide an idea of the scale of the pillage which took place in Albert, we may look at the numbers of inhabitants who submitted war damage claims to the British war claims commission. In total, 894 families submitted lists of lost possessions which fell euphemistically under the category of 'avoidable damages'.[86]Given the number of houses which remained standing after the bombardment between September 1914 and February 1915, this figure suggests that owners or tenants in 95% of the town's wartime houses suffered some form of theft. Other damage claims with similar lists, this time under the heading of 'objects taken by the British army' (significantly, the word 'theft' was never used) were also scrutinised by the cantonal evaluation commission in Albert. One such dossier was presented to the latter body by Victor Bombart. It is probable that his house would have

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[85] IWM. Papers of S.T.Eachus, 01/51/1.
[86] AMA.Council Minutes, March 1921.

served as an officers' billet throughout much of the war. Four pages were required to list the items which had been stolen at the time of the British departure. They included the following: 2 Louis XV chairs and 2 sofas (also Louis XV), 9 paintings, 2 silk curtains, 2 rugs, 1 carpet, 25 brass carpet rods, 2 leather sofas, 1 clock, 1 oak bureau, 2 children's toy-cars and 72 volumes from his personal library.[87] Though most of the men serving on the Western Front were habitual souvenir hunters, few of the possessions listed in Victor Bombart's damage claim indicate a theft which was driven by the desire for a simple *trophée de guerre*. In all probability, Bombart's curtains, paintings, rugs and chairs would have been sold off or loaded onto a military truck when the officers left Albert, to provide them with familiar trappings of domesticity in the billet of a future town.[88] The practice was common and would provoke an ironical admiration from the writer Michel Corday for the methodical way in which British troops stripped civilian homes to furnish their billets. [89] The accuracy of his observation would become fully apparent in the early months of 1919, when hundreds of stolen pianos resurfaced amidst the deserted ruins of front-line towns, often in a different department to that of their pre-war home. One of the many tasks undertaken by the prefect in the first year of peace was to publish lists of the stray pianos by their serial number in an attempt to reunite them with their rightful owners.[90]

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[87] ADS.10R43. Dommages de guerre. Dossier Bombart.

[88] Much of the furniture which appeared in Albert's war damage dossiers would also have been burned by troops as firewood. S.T.Eachus wrote that 'our Tommies exercise no distinction whatsoever and in consequence all manner of expensive woods such as mahogany etc. are all burnt indiscriminately.' IWM Papers of S.T.Eachus, 01/51/1

[89] Michel Corday, *L'envers de la guerre, journal inédit 1916-18,* (Paris, 1932), p.255. Comparing British and French methods of pillage, Corday wrote: 'The English are more methodical, they take pianos away with them in their trucks under the guise of organising the villages for defence against German attack.'

[90] ADS.10R25, *Bulletin Départemental de la Reconstruction des Régions Libérées de la Somme.* Lists of recovered pianos appeared in this newspaper throughout 1919.

The scale of pillage which took place within the military zone in 1914-18 suggests an almost total collapse of distinctions between criminality and legality. If this was true of the 'plunder fever' which took hold amongst soldiers, it can likewise be applied to the opportunistic robberies undertaken by civilians. When Amiens suffered extensive damage from German artillery fire in the spring of 1918 (over 3,000 shells had been fired), thefts from bombed houses immediately followed. The Prefect was consequently obliged to employ a permanent team of locksmiths, builders and carpenters in order to provide some level of security in bombed houses. The Amiens police also reported some difficulty in rounding up the last of the city's inhabitants for evacuation in 1918. Their reluctance to leave was driven by the desire to profit from the easy pickings left by absent neighbours. In the weekly criminal court reports in the *Progrès de la Somme*, thefts which had taken place during the period of evacuation featured prominently. On 10 January 1919 for example, Céline Charlemagne was condemned to 6 months in prison for having removed clothes, bed linen and other possessions form the flat of a departed neighbour. On the same day, Mme Blondel received a similar sentence for having broken in to two of her neighbours' homes. Her defence (typical of many cases reported in *Le Progrès de la Somme*) read as follows: 'it was in the honest intention of keeping the items safe and of then returning them to their owners.' Similar suspicions were also generated by the *indéracinables* inhabiting smaller military zone villages. In Méricourt, an anonymous letter to the prefect resulted in criminal charges against two villagers who had refused to evacuate in 1914. Eugène Fournier was accused of having sold chickens and cattle which did not belong to him (an increase in the amount of stray livestock was an inevitable consequence of evacuation from the front-line) and of having stolen clothes and bed linen from the homes of evacuees. In the same letter, Mme Villain aged 78, was denounced for having stolen 'as much as was possible.' The charge listed the clandestine sale of stolen livestock and the systematic emptying of mattresses from empty

houses in the village. Wool from the mattresses was then sent in sacks to be sold by her son in Ailly-sur-Noye, near Amiens.[91]

What conclusions can be drawn about the tensions which existed amongst communities in the military zone of the Somme? The omnipresent threat of pillage seems significant in two ways. Firstly, it serves to challenge some of the patriotic myths which were promoted by the communities themselves. Decisions to remain 'rooted' in a native village throughout the hardships of 1914-18 may have accorded with sentimental visions of the provincial patriot and his unflinching regional loyalty, but they were rarely driven by ideological belief. A chronic sense of insecurity existed amongst the front line villages. Given the reluctance of the military authorities to provide the trucks or rolling stock which would allow civilians to leave the front with their possessions intact, most inhabitants recognised that the sole means of securing their homes was through remaining at the front. Secondly, it provides an insight into the terms by which soldiers and civilians coexisted in the front line towns. Civilians may have endured traumas which were in many ways similar to those of the soldiers themselves, but it is clear that their strands of shared experience did not engender a relationship of equals. Indeed, parallels between British methods of governance and the experience of German rule are immediately apparent from the prefect's bimonthly reports on morale in the department. This is particularly so of the Somme's agricultural communes. Whilst towns such as Albert retained a significant number of shopkeepers and bar owners who were content to profit from the presence of soldiers, the fragile economies of small farming communities were wholly reliant upon the crops in their fields. More often than not, these crops formed the easy targets for thefts or of requisitions exacted in a manner more befitting an army of occupation. In February 1915 the prefect reported that mayors from villages across the Somme were

[91] ADS.KZ332/1, Police report, 17 October 1915.

unanimous in their anger at the burdens which the British were placing upon their communities. Agricultural land was frequently (and in their view needlessly) crossed by officers and their men with a subsequent destruction of much of their future yield.[92] Straw required as bedding material for troops was either stolen or requisitioned in its totality from local villages. This left nothing in their barns as reserve fodder for livestock whose access to pasture land was already severely restricted. In cases of large scale fodder requisitions, the British were also obliged to undertake the purchase of livestock which would otherwise be condemned to starvation. In the village of Chulgres a request to do this had been refused. Twenty-five horses had also been stolen. In Ville-sur-Ancre the mayor likewise reported that 'clandestine' requisitions had been taking place from farms at the dead of night, leaving farmers without the necessary documentation through which they could gain compensation.[93] Many of their subsequent complaints fell upon deaf ears. Assessing the reasons for declining morale in his own region of the Somme in December 1916, the *sous-préfet* of Montdidier indicated the insensitivity of British officers towards its farming communities as a principal factor:

> It is vital that we demand an apology for the attitude of so many British officers, who respond to the complaints of farmers in such a brutal manner: 'would you be complaining like this if we were German?' they ask, provoking endless laughter amongst themselves.

Concluding his report, the *sous-préfet* described morale in his region as 'worse than mediocre.' Their hardships had created a deep sense of scepticism. They saw little point in 'sacrificing lives and resources in a third year of war which was likely to be harder than of the others.'[94] The prefect's appraisal of the Somme's farming communities as a whole would

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[92] ADS.99M231, Prefect to the Ministry of the Interior, 21 February 1915.
[93] ADS.99M231, Mayor of Ville-sur-Ancre to the prefect, 31 January 1915.
[94] ADS.99M231, *Sous-préfet* of Montdidier to the prefect, 11 December 1916.

be similarly negative. In the following year he expressed his concern that defeatism was spreading amongst rural villages. Fearing the consequence of new invasion, some farmers were contemplating abandoning the Somme altogether and allowing their land to fall to waste.[95] Far removed from the solidarity which Pierre de Laboureyras ascribed to Albert's *indéracinables* in 1915, both accounts of war weariness accord with the observations of the British soldier, S.T.Eachus. Reflecting on the attitudes of the Somme's peasants towards the conflict, he wrote: 'la guerre est trop longue. They are generally very sick and absolutely tired and even hate the war.'[96]

Profiteers and Prostitutes: Making Money in the Military Zone

Should the war weariness of the Somme's farmers be used to indicate low morale across the military zone as a whole? Perhaps not. Town dwellers may also have suffered from thefts and iniquitous requisitions, but to many amongst them, the presence of soldiers represented a lucrative source of additional income. In January 1917, just one month after the *sous-préfet* of Montdider had reported on war weariness in his own region of the Somme, the *sous-préfet* of Péronne presented a radically different view of civilian morale. Due to the continued occupation of Péronne, his office was based between Corbie and Albert. In the latter town, he observed that women who had hitherto found employment as casual farm labourers were turning their backs on the land. By feeding troops and taking in their washing as a supplement to benefit payments as wives of mobilised men, their financial position was stronger than it had been in 1914. Much of Albert's population was similarly involved in a

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[95] ADS.KZ270, Prefect to the *sous-préfets* of Montdidier, Doullens and Péronne, December 1917. The prefect believed that defeatist propaganda was being spread by soldiers not attached to front-line units.
[96] IWM. Papers of S.T. Eachus 01/51/1.

multitude of commercial activities. The sale of alcohol, food and home-grown produce all took place at inflated prices and offered in the mind of the *sous-préfet*, a welcome compensation to the hardship of war.[97]

Despite the positive veneer painted over the commercial activity of the town, concerns over the social and economic consequences of profiteering were profound. Throughout 1914-18, Albert's magistrate was called upon to judge cases in which local shopkeepers and bar owners had flouted regulations on price fixing. In general, the guilty parties received a 7 franc fine, though occasionally (as was the case with Mme Baptiste-Blondel), repeated offences resulted in expulsion from the military zone altogether.[98] Wartime inflation was high. In the Somme prices on certain food items had soared by 800% between 1914-17. Caused by a scarcity of imported goods and low productivity, the inflationary problem was general throughout France, but in the Somme the presence of 'soldiers willing to pay any price for their purchases' was an added factor.[99] Through their acquiescence to the inflated demands of shopkeepers, soldiers priced essential items out of the range of Albert's poorer inhabitants. Bakers who were guaranteed a large profit on bread sales to troops, tended to reserve civilian flour stocks for the exclusive sale to soldiers. This was particularly problematic during the first battle of the Somme. A severe reduction in land available for cultivation left the department 'only days away from food shortages' throughout a six month period from June-December 1916. The daily sight of bread vans leaving Amiens for the front, (and the knowledge that bakers throughout the department preferred to sell bread to soldiers)

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[97] ADS.99M231, *Sous-préfet* of Péronne to the prefect, 6 January 1917.
[98] ADS.4U_536, Magistrate records 1914-15. To provide some idea of what a 7 franc fine may have signified in 1916, it is worth noting that a dozen eggs cost 2,70 francs; bread cost 75 centimes.
[99] ADS.99M231, Ministry of the Interior report, 1918.

was a cause of considerable concern for the prefect. In January 1917 an outright ban on bread sales to men in uniform was imposed throughout the Somme.[100]

British concerns with civilians in the military zone had little to do with local economics, however. Those who continued their daily lives amidst the rubble of the front-line towns aroused suspicion. Fears that sexual relations with enemy troops had been rife in the occupied towns (resulting in a potential threat to military security) were not exclusive to the civilian imagination. Such beliefs informed the way in which the British governed the communes under their control. Given the proximity of Albert to the front-line, the establishment of a signalling system between civilian spies and enemy trenches was treated as a distinct possibility. Blackout regulations, laws prohibiting civilian photography and (in rural communes) rules determining the precise position of windmill sails when in repose, were all implemented with this in mind. Civilians were also viewed as an impediment to the movement of troops and military traffic; as such the British went to considerable lengths to police their movement in and around Albert. In March 1915 they had reacted with fury to a large scale circulation of the town's inhabitants on a 3 mile stretch of road linking Albert to Buire-sur-Ancre. Due to the shelling of Albert, the prefect had authorised the collection of benefit payments (approximately 700 *Albertins* received some kind of wartime benefit) in the neighbouring village. Despite the necessity of the payment, the British looked upon the free movement of civilians as a contravention of their authority. Thereafter, their surveillance of civilian movement became increasingly strict: in August 1915 many civilians without employment in essential war work were ordered to move to communes west of Amiens and Doullens; in February of the following year, new regulations were implemented to inhibit the movement of those who remained. Henceforth, no *Albertins* would be permitted to leave the

[100] ADS.99M231, Prefect to the Ministry of the Interior, December 1916.

town by foot, car or horse without the written permission of the mayor or the local police chief. Those with permission to leave Albert were granted a stay of only 48 hours in the commune to which they had access. Civilians were thus policed in a manner which was not dissimilar to the methods employed by the German army during their occupation of Albert, a fact which is reflected in the cases brought to the attention of the local magistrate. In June 1915 for instance, Auguste Croisille was fined for walking towards the neighbouring village of Buire-sur-Ancre without a civilian pass; Mme Quillier, la femme Delamotte and Eugène Decamp were similarly punished for wandering beyond the boundaries of Méaulte. In September, Archille Laramelle was fined for having lights visible in his home during the blackout; Mme Lehoucq was punished for taking photographs without an official permit from the British military. In November Léon Rouze and three other companions were fined for having been in the streets of the town beyond the hour of curfew, which was set by the British at 8 p.m.[101] Alongside cases of profiteering and clandestine sales of alcohol to troops, infringements of this nature were the most common offences to have been dealt with in Albert's wartime courts.

Above all, it was an ever increasing population of prostitutes in the towns and villages of the military zone which generated the greatest concern amongst the Somme's civil and military authorities. Prior to 1914, in what Alain Corbin has termed 'the golden age of syphiliphobia' the position of the prostitute as France's pre-eminent social leper was well established.[102] In 1914-18, fears of long term racial degeneracy wrought by syphilis were superseded by concerns about its debilitating effect upon the fighting men of the allied armies and suspicions that prostitutes worked as spies for the enemy. As such, the sexual activity of

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[101] ADS.4U_536, Magistrate records 1914-15.
[102] Le Naour, *Misères et tourments*, p.128.

prostitutes in the Somme was viewed as tantamount to that of the military saboteur or traitor.[103] In the Somme press, *Le Réveil de Picardie* reported on the 'scandalous morals' of women in the streets of Abbeville, depicting their trade as a 'gangrene' taking grip of the town; their principal victims were 'Tommy and Dumanet.'[104] To *Le Cri du Peuple*, Amiens' vast number of street-walkers were 'poisoners and enemies of the French race,' their corruption of the allied soldier meriting 'as much hatred as the Germans.'[105] Their hostile reaction is understandable. The very visible presence of prostitutes throughout the Somme compromised the department's own claim to be an ideological frontier in a war against the depravity of barbarians.[106] Above all, the contraction of diseases such as syphilis took the soldiers charged with defending the *patrie* from the trench to the hospital wing. Archival evidence suggests that the German army deliberately repatriated women from their zone of occupation for this purpose. Monsieur Demonchaux, the mayor of Bazentin spent the first eight months of the war as a prisoner interned in Cambrai, before returning to free France in March 1915. He had escaped by disguising himself as a woman and leaving with a convoy of civilian women who were being repatriated by the Germans via Belgium, Germany and Switzerland.[107] His principal reason for risking escape was in order to inform the Somme authorities that 50 women amongst the convoy were prostitutes. Having worked in German military brothels they had contracted syphilis. As a result they were being returned to continue their trade in the allied military zone.[108]

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[103] Ibid, p.162.
[104] ADS.246PER8 *le Réveil de Picardie*, 24 July 1915.
[105] Le Naour, *Misères et tourments*, p.131.
[106] See Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, "Le front en picardie en 1914-18: creuset et frontière idéologique," in Anne Dumenil and Philippe Nivet (eds.), *Picardie, terre de frontière*, (Amiens, 1998), p.130.
[107] This was the route, which all repatriated prisoners took when the process began in 1915. The mayor's circuitous journey from Cambrai to the Somme is likely to have taken around three weeks.
[108] ADS.KZ332/2, Report of the mayor of Bazentin to the *commissare de police*, 6 April 1915

Wartime prostitution proved difficult to police. It was prevalent in villages amongst local women whose husbands were away at the front, but police reports of 1915 suggest that the trade in the Somme was dominated by outsiders. A rootless population of 'femmes galantes' had spent the war shifting continuously between Paris, the Somme and Pas-de-Calais. They targeted five or six military towns en-route where they remained for only a number of days in order to avoid further surveillance.[109] Amiens was one such target. The neighbourhood around the railway station (a principal meeting point for prostitutes and men heading to and from the front) was reported to be 'literally invaded with such women.'[110] This had been so from the beginning of the war. In October 1914 the prefect had reacted to their increased presence in the city by calling for their expulsion from the military zone altogether. Twenty extra gendarmes had been employed for this purpose, checking the registers of hotels and *maisons-garnies*. The policy had little impact. When S.T. Eachus visited Amiens on leave in 1915, prostitutes remained an omnipresent feature of the city's street life:

> In fact, nearly all of the women and young girls appeared to be in the streets for no other purpose. I was personally accosted continuously, one woman, grabbing hold of my arm really would not let go...nearly everyone carries a flashlight, especially the women who wish to sell their favours. They flash their torches continuously in to one's eyes.[111]

Their proliferation appears to have continued unabated. In 1917, the mayor of Amiens voiced his concern over the growing housing crisis in the city and linked the problem to the incoming flow of women. Despite its numerical loss of men through mobilisation, the city's population had grown between 5 and 10% over that of 1914. In December of 1917, he

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[109] Hotel owners were legally obliged to inform the police of any new residents within 48 hours of their residency.
[110] ADS.KZ591, Report of the 2nd bureau of the 6th army, September 1915.
[111] IWM. Papers of S.T.Eachus 01/51/1.

reported that many of the 'femmes galantes' who had arrived with the intention of residing in the city's hotels, had been forced to live on the streets due to a lack of rooms in which they could be accommodated.[112] Like the prefect, the mayor concluded his report with a demand for a more rigorous policy of expulsion. Legally however, their hands were tied. Prostitutes who submitted to a weekly medical examination *(filles-soumises)* were legally entitled to descend upon the military zone and ply their trade amongst soldiers on leave from the front. Any expulsions which did occur from the Somme were consequently limited to *clandestines* (women who supplemented their low incomes through casual prostitution, but refused official recognition of their status and the medical surveillance which came with it), or women known to have contracted syphilis. Thus in the fishing village of St.Valery-sur-Somme (largely populated in 1914-18 by refugees and British soldiers) Isabelle Couvrière was denounced as a clandestine prostitute and expelled from the military zone with her three children. In the neighbouring commune of Le Crotoy a divorcee accused his ex-wife and daughter of returning to the village purely to sell their favours to local troops. They too were removed from the Somme and instead worked the boulevards of Paris. In Abbeville, a bar owner with a clientele largely composed of men in uniform drew accusation of clandestine prostitution from her neighbours. This too resulted in her eviction from the town.[113] In the village of Poix however, the demands of the mayor that Gabrielle and Lucie Lignier (two newly arrived *filles-soumises* from Nieppe) be expelled, ended in failure. Despite the mayor's insistence that their trade in the village had resulted in numerous cases of disorder and one murder amongst French troops, the demand was turned down. The military authority stated that as neither of the sisters had been contaminated with syphilis their trade was legitimate and so too was their residence.[114]

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[112] R. Meissel, *La Picardie dans la Grande Guerre 1914-18*, (Amiens, 1986), p.111
[113] ADS.KZ316, Expulsions de la zone militaire.
[114] ADS.KZ247, Commander in Chief of the 6th army to the prefect, 9 October 1916.

Like Amiens, Abbeville and the smaller Somme villages in which large numbers of allied troops were billeted, Albert was a natural target of military zone prostitutes. Jean Yves le Naour asserts that most of the 'femmes galantes' were equipped with documentation which permitted them to ply their trade in which ever commune they wished.[115] It seems probable however that their access to towns located in the advanced sector of the military zone was limited. The determination of the British to both monitor civilian movement and to keep their numbers down to a bare minimum in Albert is amply demonstrated by local court records. It seems unlikely therefore that incoming prostitutes such as the Lignier sisters would have been accepted by the military authority as a legitimate addition to the community. Strict surveillance was applied to all incoming traffic to Albert, and though there is evidence that prostitutes attempted to enter the town by hitching rides in military vehicles, court records suggest that they were turned away on the outskirts of the town.[116] This is not to suggest that Albert was an island of front-line morality, but prostitution is unlikely to have taken place on the scale or in the very public manner which had provoked the fury of the *Le Réveil de Picardie, Le Cri du Peuple,* the mayor of Amiens and the prefect of the Somme.

Denunciations for clandestine prostitution took place nonetheless and one particular case is worth highlighting here. It concerned a Mme Boulanger who had left Albert immediately after the occupation of 1914, returning in the spring of 1917. To supplement her income (she was the wife of a soldier and thus reliant upon municipal benefits), Mme Boulanger took in washing for British troops and was involved in the 'clandestine' sale of alcohol to soldiers from a room in her house. As the nature of her wartime employment brought her into an

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[115] Le Naour, *Misères et tourments* p.173.
[116] ADS.4U_537, Magistrate records 1917-18.

informal contact with soldiers within the private sphere of her home, Mme Boulanger was an obvious target for accusations of prostitution. Her accuser (it was a nephew whose own patriotic credentials had been questioned earlier in the war) also referred to the time she had spent in Paris between 1914-17 and the frequent trips she continued to make to the capital. Through the rootless nature of her wartime life and her efforts to earn money from the presence of soldiers, she thus fitted the social identity of a classic *femme galante.*[117] The case was eventually dismissed as slanderous, but it serves to highlight the fragile economic position of many women whose husbands served at the front, and the social marginality which could result from it. Mme Boulanger's expulsion from Albert was ultimately prevented by the testimony of a neighbour which was supported by the mayor. Others whose social status within their community was less secure, were less fortunate. This was particularly so of refugees, whose expulsion from a village may have been encouraged as relieving an economic burden.[118] In a neighbouring village of Hérissart for example, a similar case culminated in the expulsion of Marthe Guisson. Like Mme Boulanger, the absence of her husband's wage had obliged Marthe Guisson to supplement her income through laundering the clothes of French and British soldiers. Her activity was observed by British military police who raided her home one evening and found a British soldier there after the hour of curfew. Despite her protestations that the soldier was simply there to collect his washing, the accusation was upheld by the mayor and she was given four days to pack her belongings and leave.[119]

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[117] ADS.KZ316, Expulsions de la zone militaire, 1914-18.

[118] Jean Yves Le Naour argues that in small communes, mayors who knew about the clandestine prostitution of local women were reluctant to notify the military authorities. This may have been the case with Mme Boulanger in Albert. It is unlikely though that similar protection was afforded to refugees. In such cases their expulsion may have been welcomed. *Misères et tourments*, p.176.

[119] ADS.99R3534, Marthe Guisson to the prefect 6 January 1916.

The misfortune of Marthe Guisson in Hérissart, of Isabelle Couvrière in Abbeville, of Mme Baptiste-Blondel, the bar owner in Albert and of many women likewise expelled from the military zone, raises a number of important questions. Where did they live after their expulsion? and how did they sustain themselves (and their families) for the rest of the war? The financial implications of expulsion were undoubtedly grave. Inherent in the movement of any refugee across wartime France was the dislocation of the networks which supported them. Most of the cases involved women who were dependent upon the benefit payments they received from a local town hall. Decisions to remain 'rooted' in (or close to) a native commune throughout the war were often influenced by this simple fact. Expulsion from the military zone did not of course negate their entitlement to benefit payments elsewhere, but it is certain that all of the women would have faced a period of time without any financial support. From wartime correspondence between refugees and the prefect of the Somme it is apparent that most who left the department (through expulsion or evacuation) were forced to wait several weeks (possibly months), whilst the legitimacy of their claim was examined in a new commune. Some found themselves turned away from communes where mayors were unwilling to accept an added financial burden. Women such as Marthe Guisson may not have been involved in prostitution prior to their departure from the Somme, but it is clear that once they became refugees, the likelihood of them becoming *clandestines* in order to survive were considerably greater. In Paris, where most of the refugees headed[120], Jean Yves Le Naour states that clandestine prostitution 'surpassed anything that had ever been seen before.' Prior to the Great War only 4% of the city's *clandestines* had originated from the 10 departments which would form the Western Front; by December 1916, this percentage had

[120] In may 1916, the Ministry of the Interior reported that there were 828,578 refugees in the interior. According to the *Journal des Réfugiés du Nord* (6 May 1916) 'a very large proportion' had settled in Paris and its suburbs.

increased almost five fold.[121] Their presence on the capital's boulevards is indicative of their poverty and the extent of their marginality. It also provides a plausible explanation as to how the exiles of the Western Front ultimately acquired such a negative collective persona. By working the streets as prostitutes, refugee claims of victimhood were severely compromised by counter-claims which presented them as the nation's sexual pariahs. In the increasingly accusatory culture of the home front, *les Boches du nord* were thus deeply incriminated. Fears that the flow of rootless humans from the war zone of the Western Front was accelerating the nation's moral decline would have a crucial bearing upon the recognition afforded to their misery and their hardship.

Refugees in the interior 1914-18

Between 1914-18, the geography of exile from the Western Front changed considerably. Population shifts from the war zone in the opening two years of the war had been marked by two key characteristics, with refugees choosing exile in the Parisian region or a more localised place of refuge within a native department. By 1916 there existed a gross imbalance in the way the refugee burden was being distributed across France. Ministry of the Interior statistics on refugees published in May of that year, suggested that whilst Paris and the uninvaded arrondissements in Nord, Pas-de-Calais and Somme had borne the brunt of the 828,578,00 human flood from the north, departments in the west, the centre and the Midi had barely been touched at all. In Alpes-Maritimes (comprising as it did the holiday resorts along the Côte d'Azur where refugees were unlikely to be welcomed with open arms[122]) less than

[121] Le Naour, *Misères et tourments* pp.167-8.

[122] Coastal resorts were notorious for their ill treatment of refugees. In the Somme itself, hotel owners in Mers-les-Bains who had been content to profit from refugees in the winter of

500 exiles from the Western Front could be counted; in the Ardèche the figure was less than 350, of which only 5 originated from Nord; in the Vaucluse, 169 inhabitants from Nord and 180 from Pas-de-Calais amounted to roughly the same figure.[123]

By 1918, the imbalance had been partially redressed. Though there is little evidence that the burdens borne by Paris had eased in any significant way (homeless exiles in the final year of the war transformed the place St. Sulpice in the capital's 6th arrondissement in to a 'refugee village'[124]) it is clear that the pattern of localised dispersal had given way to population shifts over a far greater expanse of territory. This was mainly due to the early success of the German Spring Offensive. In the Somme, the dramatic emptying of towns and villages from Albert to Amiens which resulted from the German advance, had negated the possibility of localised exile. For Albert's 500 strong population, the final months of the war, would not be spent in communes on the undamaged fringes of the military zone, but in villages across the distant departments of Alpes-Maritimes, Hautes-Alpes and Puy-de-Dôme. So too with the neighbouring town of Corbie, just 18 kilometres west of Albert. Following its own evacuation in the spring of 1918, a local doctor (who had taken up residence in Paris) compiled a directory with information on his fellow inhabitants' places of refuge. The first 90 familles which appeared on the doctor's list were exiled in 50 different communes stretching between Abbeville and Nice. In only three towns or villages throughout France did more than two families from Corbie remain side by side.[125]

1914, demanded their expulsion from the town at the approach of the 1915 summer season. They were backed by the mayor who complained to the prefect that the continued residence of refugees was threatening the town's livelihood. See R. Meissel, *La Picardie dans la Grande Guerre*, pp. 100-101. Complaints of enormous rent rises in hotel resorts at the approach of *la belle saison*, were frequently voiced in the refugee press.

[123] *Le Journal des Réfugiés du Nord*, 6 May 1916. The refugee statistics I have quoted here appeared in this edition.

[124] AF.F23/4, *Le Remois*, April 1918.

[125] ADS.99R3549, Evacuations, 1918.

Clues about the anxieties which most refugees felt about their wartime status can be gleaned from the locations of the towns and villages in which they sought exile. This is particularly true of the very localised population shifts which took place in the Somme. The choice of exile in a neighbouring village was generally motivated by a fear of the marginality and public humiliation which seemed to await refugees who voyaged further afield. Proximity to the abandoned rubble of a pre-war home often eased the process of integration in to a new community. Refugees could call upon the support of friends and extended family networks to find them jobs and accommodation without undergoing the public ritual of begging for formal assistance from the town hall. The commune of Bonnay, located 15 kilometres from Albert provides an example of how this process may have taken place. It received 22 refugees from the town in 1914, with a further 10 exiles originating from the villages of Fricourt and Beaucourt. The reaction of the mayor to their presence in the village was encouraging. Each of the incoming refugees 'had found homes with friends and family members who had invited them.' They were 'courageous and hardworking people who had provided much needed help to our farmers during the harvest.' None of them had asked for financial assistance from the commune or from the state but had lived from the fruits of their labour. 'It is to be hoped that they remain here.'[126]

Material stability had a crucial bearing on the social status of an exile, a fact which all refugees were aware of, from the moment they abandoned their homes. When the departing inhabitants of Amiens boarded trains in to exile from the city's *Gare du Nord* in May 1918, their carriages were not only packed with the precious artefacts of the city's bourgeoisie; sewing machines and work tools were amongst the most common items of hand luggage to

[126] ADS.99R3138/2, Mayor of Bonnay to the prefect, December 1914.

be crammed on to the trains with the refugees.[127] The possession of such items (the luxury of a leisurely evacuation) provided Amiens's refugees with the opportunity of avoiding the poverty trap of exile. Those who left with nothing (many were not even able to salvage their precious identity cards from their homes) were less assured of the status they would occupy. Invariably, their poverty aroused suspicion and resentment. Some sought to avoid humiliation through secrecy. According to the director of the Emergency Committee for Refugees in the Somme, cases of 'hidden misery' were commonplace; fearful that their degradation would be exposed before an unsympathetic public whenever they formed daily queues for food or financial help, many refugees 'had not dared to seek the assistance which was available to them.'[128] In one such case in the Somme, a family of 7 local refugees had pleaded with the mayor of Saigneville to allow them to remain in his village. Despite a prefectoral order that they move to Rouen, they had been too afraid to leave and face the humiliation of becoming 'public refugees'[129]

Their fears of the resentments being nurtured in the departments across the interior were far from groundless. In Lyon for instance, the city's new arrivals were declaimed by the *Nouvelliste Lyonnais* as people who 'believed that they had the right to be fed, but who refused any obligation towards work.'[130] Many other examples of hostility or indifference would emerge in the 1914-18 period: in the department of Orne, a refugee was turned away by a local mayor in March 1918 because 'he had enough refugees already in his village and had no intention of paying for any more'; likewise in Haute-Garonne, where five refugees were turned away without food or shelter on a freezing night in April of the same year. Other

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[127] ADS.KZ2866, Evacuations d'Amiens, May-August 1918.
[128] ADS.99R3540, Report of the director of the emergency committee for refugees in the Somme, September 1917.
[129] ADS.99R3138/2, Mayor of Saigneville to the prefect, December 1914.
[130] *Le Journal des Réfugiés du Nord* 25 March 1916. The article is quoted in this edition.

complaints of petty injustices and casual insults abounded throughout the Paris based refugee press: policemen in Paris's 18th arrondissement were criticised by *Le Remois* for the 'total lack of respect' they had shown to the 'principal victims of the war' as they formed their daily queue for the 1,50 franc benefit payment outside the town hall.[131] In the *Journal des Réfugiés du Nord*, a refugee employed as a housemaid by a Parisian councillor made headline news for the pitiful wages she received. The councillor defended his parsimony with a line of argument which further stoked the anger of its journalists: he suggested that as 'she was only a refugee, she ought to have been more grateful for the hospitality which had been shown to her.'[132] In the town of Romilly, *Le Remois* reported that local inhabitants had adopted the phrase 'la vermine du front' as the collective title for the flow of incoming exiles; in Bayeux, it gleefully recounted that a local magistrate had imposed a fine on a like-minded civilian who had slurred a refugee and her daughter by referring to their former lives in (*les*) *pays Boches;* this it concluded, was a 'good lesson' for all inhabitants of the interior, so familiar was the insult to the ears of all exiles.[133]

In much of the journalism which emanated from the refugee press in 1914-18, a singular determination to depict the uninvaded regions of France as self-centred and wilfully ignorant of refugee suffering is apparent. In reality however, the notion that regions which remained physically untouched by the war, were by nature less generous than those which had suffered invasion, is untenable. As the war progressed and the economic realities of the conflict bit deeper throughout France, it was inevitable that attitudes towards refugees would harden. This was as true for the prefect in Amiens and his mayors in the Somme as it was for their counterparts across the interior. In 1915 for instance, Mme Vve Martin, a 75 year old refugee

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[131] AF.F23/4, *Le Remois*, October 1918.
[132] *Le Journal des Réfugiés du Nord*, 25 November 1916.
[133] AF.F23/4, *Le Remois*, September 1918.

from Albert, whose possessions had been lost in the bombardment, wrote to the Somme's prefect pleading for financial support. Her comfortable pre-war position as a rentier was however sufficient to raise suspicions about her claims of poverty. On none of the 4 occasions on which she wrote, was she deemed worthy of a reply.[134] Mme Vve Bertoux also wrote to the prefect in September in 1916; forced in to exile from Albert at the height of the battle of the Somme, she too claimed that she had been unable to salvage any of her possessions. The meagre daily allocation of 1,50 francs was nevertheless judged a sufficiently generous remuneration.[135] Having abandoned Roye without any of her clothing Augustine Prudhomme considered her financial position as 'extremely precarious.' In exile, she had been obliged to become a prostitute, a fact which she acknowledged to the prefect when she requested items of winter clothing. Her demand was turned down; the words 'woman of light morals' being highlighted in their response.[136]

Insensitivity towards the plight of refugees was by no means the unique preserve of the uninvaded interior. Nor was it simply an aspect of the bourgeois complacency imagined in the refugee press. At its core lay a crisis of civilian morale which was general throughout France. By the end of 1917, the concerns of demoralisation expressed by *sous-préfets* on the fringes of the war zone were but single voices in a sea of discontent. Just 3 prefects reported to the Minister of the Interior that war support remained strong within their department. In some regions, demoralisation had become an established facet of daily life at a far earlier stage of the conflict. In January 1915, Alfred Morain (prefect of Seine-Inférieure) expressed his disgust at the relentless exploitation of the 'Norman reservoir' which was enabling Paris to feast from white flour whilst his own people starved on the black bread earmarked for the

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[134] ADS.99R3376, Mme Vve Martin to the prefect, June 1915.
[135] ADS.99R3391, Mme Vve Bertoux to the prefect, 26 September 1916
[136] ADS.99R3391, Augustine Prudhomme to the prefect, 17 September 1916.

prisons.[137] In April 1916, Aristide Prat, a deputy in Seine-et-Oise likewise complained of poor supplies of coal, meat and other essentials in the rural areas of his department. Amongst the village communities he reported on a feeling of abandonment and profound discontent.[138]

Wartime privation fostered a disregard for mutual suffering. Soldiers who sought to express their hardships by vitriolic attacks on an imagined community of *embusqués* and profiteers were not alone. A similar social model served to define civilian suffering. In each department, hardship was not so much viewed as an inevitable element of wartime life, but as a unique and deeply iniquitous form of imposition. In Seine-Inférieure, it was not merely the emptying of the 'Norman reservoir' which enraged prefect Morain, but the suspicion that Paris was growing ever fatter as a result. In this climate of mutual resentment, the vulnerability of the refugee becomes apparent: Henri Barbusse's telling observation that in wartime 'one is always somebody else's shirker' was as likely to apply as much to those whose homes had been lost amidst the gun-smoke of the battlefield as to those whose wartime kitchens and wine cellars remained mysteriously well-stocked. Particularly vulnerable were the repatriated refugees who flowed in to France from internment camps in Belgium and Germany. Many possessed only the clothes in which they stood, daubed as they were in the yellow paint which marked their particular place of incarceration. Stuffed in their pockets were the useless bank notes which had circulated in the towns under occupation. At the border town of Evian, they were permitted to exchange only a limited quantity of the locally printed currency, with a maximum value being placed at 100 francs.[139] Far from

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[137] AF.F23/104, Dossiers par département, 1915. Report of the prefect of Seine-Inférieure. Alfred Morain was to become the Somme's prefect in the aftermath of the Great War.
[138] AF.F23/104, Dossiers par département, report of Aristide Prat, deputy of Seine et Oise, April 1916.
[139] Rent prices for single rooms in Amiens at this time would have been in the region of 20 francs per month.

welcoming its civilian prisoners from the clutches of German occupation, the French government was deeply concerned that their poverty would only serve to exacerbate existing social tensions throughout the country. Negotiations took place with the Swiss in order to stem the tide of in-comers. As 20,000 refugees massed in border towns at the end of 1916, the French government demanded 15 days notice prior to the departure of any convoy and requested that the maximum number in each shipment be limited to 500. [140] The plight of those who finally reached Paris and began the search for a home and a job aroused the attention of the *Journal des Réfugiés du Nord.* In a parody of the city street signs asking Parisians to 'be kind to animals,' the paper requested that an effort be made by the city in order to treat refugees in a like manner:

> For the last three weeks, the repatriated of the occupied regions have been arriving in Paris. They need homes and they need food. Naively, most of them hope that they will be provided with such things. They think that the word 'repatriated' should be some form of pass word which will open doors for them. But the reverse is the case. The doors are closing and the concierges and the landlords rarely open their mouths to these poor people, other than to tell them to go and hang themselves somewhere else...How could it be that Paris, which demonstrated such solidarity at the beginning of the war, now shows such ingratitude? Could it be that Paris has forgotten that the occupied departments have been its shield and its ransom chest? 'Be kind to animals' we read everywhere in the streets of Paris. Clearly animals deserved our kindness, but don't the repatriated deserve some consideration as well?[141]

The insistence of the *Journal des Réfugiés du Nord* that the northern departments merited recognition as Paris's 'shield and ransom chest,' belied an insecurity which went far beyond the concerns it expressed for the material plight of its exiles. Its goal -of promoting an image of refugees as unblemished patriots- was proving increasingly unrealistic. Instead, the 1

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[140] AF.F23/1, Conference inter-ministerial, September 1916. The convoy system from Switzerland would be suspended for a number of weeks in 1918 as the civilian exodus from the Somme took place. The government felt it would be impossible to find accommodation for both sets of refugees.

[141] *Le Journal des Réfugiés du Nord,* 17 February 1917

million strong population of impoverished *déracinés* formed an inviting target as the counter-type to the ideal of the moral civilian. Their presence in communities across the interior, suggested that Barrèsian visions of France discovering its true self through war, of a nation redefining itself through the ancient virtues of loyalty to the regional earth, were illusory. What seemed to emerge between 1914-18 was less a revitalised nation of *enraciné* rural patriots than one which found itself entrapped in the begging culture of homeless exiles. By virtue of their very rootlessness, refugees were fundamentally tainted. Women in particular were poorly placed to fulfil the wartime role of enduring marital fidelity which was demanded of them. Rootlessness suggested an absence of surveillance; it indicated the rupture of the familial ties which had hitherto governed their moral behaviour. It invited accusations of sexual complicity and cheap prostitution. From this perspective it is easy to understand how an image of the female exile as the inverse of the faithful wartime wife could flourish on such a grand scale. The image was of course, far from fanciful. The growth of refugee prostitution on the boulevards of Paris did much to substantiate the accusation and uphold the prejudice. Ultimately though, the myth would acquire its sharp definition by the intense focus which was placed upon the sexual transgressions some amongst them had committed prior to their flight from the Western Front.

Though stories of sexual liaisons with the enemy rarely occupied newspaper space in the national press, the desire of the home front for a more detailed exposure of female morality in the occupied zones of the Western Front would not be disappointed. News emanated from a variety of alternative sources. Official government reports on atrocities in 1914, local reports by mayors to their prefects, written denunciations by fellow refugees, official histories, and novels, provided a relentless flow of myths, facts and opinions; they suggest that a stock-image of the immoral Western Front female, loomed large in the collective

imagination of the home-front.[142] In Albert for instance, Pierre de Laboureyras ignored the leftist overtone of his work, by pointing towards the town's *faubourgs* as the source of its own moral stain. From the outlying working class quarters, there had emerged a small number of 'sad creatures' determined to profit from the arriving German troops. The author deemed it necessary to record their activity 'in order to stigmatise those who had brought shame on to an honest town.'[143] In Albert's canton, the mayor of Bazentin was likewise dismayed at the behaviour of local women, expressing his astonishment at the intimate terms of their coexistence with German troops.[144] Further afield in St.Quentin, a repatriated refugee reported that prostitution was rife in the town. Married women with no previous reputation for immorality were openly offering themselves to German soldiers of all ranks. Some bore the physical disfigurements which resulted from their liaisons. Drugged with chloroform by their lovers as they slept, they had been tattooed with obscene images and military symbols on their faces and necks.[145] The conviction that the terror which marked the initial stages of occupation in August and September 1914, had been gradually superseded by a growing intimacy between civilians and their German occupiers would also inspire myths of revenge acts. Popular stories emanating from unoccupied villages of the Somme, played upon collective fears that those in the occupied zone had actively assisted the German army in their war effort. According to S.T.Eachus, it was widely assumed that allied troops (both British and French) advancing on the town of Combles and its local villages in 1915 (Combles is located in the neighbouring canton to Albert) had punished the collaborators by indiscriminately killing any of the civilians they encountered.[146]

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[142] Corday, *L'envers de la guerre, 1916-18*, p.183.
[143] De Laboureyras, *La ville d'Albert*, p.53.
[144] ADS.KZ332/2, Mayor of Bazentin to the prefect, April 1915.
[145] ADS.KZ332/2, H. Belmot to the prefect, 7 August 1915.
[146] IWM Papers of S.T.Eachus, 01/51/1.

Damaging though local rumours of unpatriotic behaviour may have been to the refugees' demand for recognition as France's principal civilian victims of the Great War, it was through the genre of the war novel that their fabled transgressions were most brutally exploited. One such example is Barbusse's *Le feu.* Awarded the *Prix Goncourt* in 1916, much of the acclaim generated by the novel was based around Barbusse's presentation of the horrific conditions endured by the *poilus* in the trenches. The author's claim that France's soldiers were themselves the passive victims of a meaningless struggle, rather mythical warriors engaged in the battle for civilisation, owed much to his negative portrayal of the civilian communities on the fringes of the battlefields. The civilians imagined by Barbusse were almost entirely profiteers, both ignorant and indifferent to the horrific realities unfolding beyond the cosy parameters of their towns. Their women were also guilty of sexual complicity. In one of the novel's most powerful scenes, the doomed *poilu* Poterloo is helped by German soldiers on the other side of no mans land to secretly return to his wife, an exile in occupied Lens. Stunned by the scene he encounters from her window, he never dares to enter her home. His final image of his wife is dominated by the humiliation of her suggested betrayal:

> My eyes fell upon Clothilde. I saw her clearly, she was sitting between two (German) junior officers. What was she doing? Nothing. Smiling...She was happy, she had an air of contentment sitting next to these Boche officers. It was not a forced smile, but a real one, one which she gave freely...I could also see my little son holding his hands out to one of the men and trying to climb on to his knee. Who else did I recognise? Madeleine Vandaërt, the wife of Vandaërt, my friend in the 19th infantry regiment who was killed at the Marne. She knew he was dead because she was wearing mourning clothes. She laughed and giggled and looked at the two men as if to say 'I am so happy.'[147]

[147] Barbusse, *Le feu*, pp. 180-181.

Other authors took their explorations of wartime sexuality much further. Basing their work around the potent theme of the atrocities of August and September 1914, accounts of war-rape became assimilated within the growing body of wartime literature as an acceptable topic of popular reading matter. In the novels spawned by the immense body of factual information published by the allied atrocity commissions in 1915, the German soldier emerged in the form of the animalised barbarian. Devoid of idealism, their war aims were governed almost entirely by their base sexual instincts. The discourse of Schimmel in Louis Dumour's novel *Nach Paris* is one such example of the brutalised persona attributed to the German:

> Culture is all very well, but let us leave that to the professors. We are soldiers. We risk our skins but we find immediate compensations. For myself, when I enter France with my sabre aloft, I want to fight, kill, eat, drink and rape. After that I couldn't care less.[148]

Dumour's 1918 novel suggests that the demonisation of the German soldier, so evident in the Somme press in 1914, retained its powerful resonance throughout the entire war. This served to highlight the shifts in the perception of their victims which had taken place in the same period. Invariably, literary visions of women who had suffered rape at the hands of German soldiers invited an element of voyeurism. Fundamental to each of them was the accusation that female sexual desire exposed their patriotic feeling as weak and superficial. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau suggests that this desire to denounce is a common element of all novels which touched on the issue. It would be particularly explicit in Michel Provin's 1915 work *L'horrible secret*:

> Who would deny, that even under the violence of the attack, even during the furious struggle, their weak nature did not allow a brief moment of consent?[149]

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[148] Louis Dumour, *Nach Paris* (Paris 1919), p.65.
[149] Audoin Rouzeau, *L'enfant de l'ennemi*, p.98

Other writers questioned the status of women as unblemished victims of German occupation through more subtle forms of persuasion. Permitting the reader a certain complicity with the perpetrators of rape, their female characters appeared as highly desirable *trophées de guerre.* The crime itself thus acquired a sense of covert legitimacy. Witness the advertisement which appeared in Catholic paper, *L'Écho de Paris* for the 1918 novel *En esclavage*:

> Two young girls, one of less than 30, the other only 20; a child, "a real child" said one of the soldiers who took her away. The two young ladies who were forced to submit to the most ancient form of savagery, are truly charming. We witness the ignominy of a race expressing its base instinct. There is sadism in this tale and the desire to sully all that is pure, a vile joy in causing pain...[150]

Audoin-Rouzeau suggests that both in its voyeurism and explicit sexual content, the genre of the rape-novel reached its most extreme form in Dumour's *Nach Paris*. Here, the pent-up lust of the young German soldier, Wilfred Herring, and that of the reader become one and the same. Once more, the reader's obligation towards a sense of patriotic outrage was superseded by the author's desire to titillate; once more the status of the female as a victim of war was marginalised:

> I got out of bed to see what was happening. It was Schlapps and his men returning from their expedition with 3 or 4 struggling captives. From my torch-light I could see they were young and pretty. Dishevelled and bare-chested, one of them had fainted and was carried by two soldiers, her hair flowing to the floor, her bare legs visible through her torn skirt. I went back to bed. Would I be able to sleep? My mind was full of images of the scenes which were taking place. I imagined the captain throwing himself like a wild boar on his prey, stripping her naked and hurling her on to the ottoman...I saw Schlapps choosing the prettiest, torturing her with his sordid caress... I imagined the orgy boiling over, the beds turned over, the sofa ripped apart, the army boots mixing with the silk and the bedclothes, the tears, the skin, the flesh, the frenzy, the bites, the blood, the fluid. These images disgusted and excited me at the same time. I felt invaded with fatigue

[150] *L'Écho de Paris*, 26 March 1918.

> and desire. I too needed to feel flesh against my own..I wanted pure white flesh, not to brutalise, but to stroke and to penetrate.[151]

Louis Dumour's services to French wartime literature would ultimately earn him the accolade of the *Légion d'Honneur*. The award did not generate a universal sense of approval. Prominent moralists such as Émile Pourésy ignored the author's own claim that *Nach Paris* was a necessary exposure of Germanic sadism and judged the theme of the work to be a convenient vehicle for the pedalling of pornography.[152] For the refugees of the Western Front, the success of *Nach Paris* highlighted the very public nature of their descent from victims of enemy brutality to objects of cheap titillation. Exposed in the pages of *Nach Paris* and novels of the same genre were the ways in which the home-front approached the complexities of their own war experience: endlessly seeking refuge behind the facade of a moral identity which required an ever more extreme countertype to sustain itself. The consequence was the trivialisation of some of the war's less palatable aspects. Trivialisation was also a product of the war's longevity.[153] Like many who suffered in 1914-18 and believed that their suffering merited the universal recognition of the home-front, refugees were the victims of a conflict which outlived the ideals by which it had initially been defined. The language which sustained the myth of a sacred war in 1914 had not died away altogether by 1918, but its rhetoric rang increasingly hollow as the conflict dragged on: observing the casual manner in which Parisian girls thumbed through magazine photographs of the war dead in 1918, Michel Corday suggested that the mythical aura with which the home-front had envelopped the fallen of 1914 had been replaced by the indifference of the desensitised.[154] Popular

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[151] Dumour, *Nach Paris*, pp. 147-8
[152] Le Naour, *Misères et tourments* p.339
[153] See George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars,* (New York, 1991), pp127-55.
[154] Corday, *L'envers de la guerre*, 1916-18, p15.

perceptions of the refugee could be said to have undergone a similar transformation. Contemptuously referred to as *les Boches du nord* by 1918, the very marginality of the Western Front's exiles had, in the latter stages of the war, served to encourage both the public exposure of their suffering and its distorted representation as a form of moral transgression. In this sense, the genre of literature typified by *Nach Paris* was less the threat to morality imagined by Émile Pourésy, than a product of the home-front's own need to find moral certitude by stigmatising unpatriotic 'others,' a process in which Pourésy himself had played an important role.[155] The crude manipulation of the atrocities and brutalities which in 1914 had served to encapsulate an entire nation's sense of martyrdom, would not be forgotten by their victims. For the refugees who began the return journey to the wasteland of the Somme in the aftermath of the Great War, the 'hated home-front' would loom large in their perception of the post-war nation[156]: the foundations of their own myths of life in the post-war ruins had already been laid.

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[155] Le Naour, *Misères et tourments,* p.54. Pourésy wrote for the *Bulletins d'informations antipornographiques* and became increasingly convinced that France's *guerre moralisatrice* had been hijacked by those intent on driving society in to a moral sewer.

[156] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War, 1914-18: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War* (Oxford, 1992), pp.94-5. The hatred which Audoin-Rouzeau ascribes to *poilus* would be mirrored in the refugee communities.

CHAPTER THREE

'INVIOLABLE IN THE MAJESTY OF THEIR DESERT': RESETTLEMENT AND ITS MYTHS 1918-21

> Having crossed the town from each direction, I have witnessed its total destruction. The scene is distressing and has left me with a profound sense of sadness. The fire and the bombs have destroyed all of the houses. They now form a mass of rubble and bricks, covering a few items of smashed furniture. The cellars have been mostly smashed in, their entrances obstructed (by the rubble). No building is repairable. The streets are full of craters caused by the bombing. In those which have not yet been cleared of rubble, it is only possible to move down them by foot and across the rubble heaps. All of the bridges across the river and the railway line have been destroyed. Not only have all individual homes been destroyed, so too have all of the town's buildings. The church is now a uniform mass, without its roof and its tower. The numerous industrial chimneys which were once the pride of the industrial quarter have been destroyed. The cemetery has been devastated, the trees smashed to pieces, the grave stones smashed or turned over, exposing numerous coffins. With the destruction caused by artillery and aerial bombardment, we must add the wilful and systematic plunder of the Boche: beyond the pillage of homes and shops, all machines and any items of copper were taken from the factories, the same applies even to the municipal water pumps and the bronze statue from the war memorial in the Place Faidherbe. Nothing remains of Albert and the town will have to be completely rebuilt.[1]

Emile Leturcq's inventory of Albert took place in the wake of its liberation by the British army in August 1918. Printed in the Abbeville newspaper, *La Somme*, his assessment of the devastation was marginally inaccurate: despite the massive artillery response by the British after the town fell to the German army in the Spring Offensive of March 1918, 86 partially damaged buildings remained standing. By omitting this fact from the publication, Leturcq hoped to prevent a premature (and opportunistic) civilian inhabitation of the town's ruins:

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[1] ADS.263PER1, *La Somme*, August 1918.

elsewhere in the canton, the unauthorised presence of post-war scavengers would provoke accusations of theft and profiteering from exiled peasants. The town's *bilan de guerre* was astounding nonetheless: 2051 houses out of pre-war total of 2137 had been destroyed in their entirety. The pattern of devastation would be repeated throughout the canton. In the villages which straddled the Bapaume road to the north and east of Albert (Auchonvillers, Authuille, Aveluy, Bazentin, Beaucourt, Beaumont-Hamel, Bécordel, Contalmaison, Courcelette, Fricourt, Ovillers-la-Boisselle and Thiepval) all buildings had been reduced to ruins. Only in the few communes situated to the south and west of Albert, marginally beyond the boundary of either the front-line of the battle of the Somme in 1916 and the furthest point of the German Spring Offensive in March 1918, did the post-war townscape bear any resemblance to that of August 1914. At Buire-sur-Ancre for instance, only 5 buildings out of 94 had been destroyed; though derelict, the remaining 89 were all repairable.[2]

Commune	Buildings in 1914	Buildings totally destroyed in 1914-18
Auchonvillers	83	83
Authuille	60	60
Aveluy	143	141
Bazentin	71	71
Beaucourt-sur-Ancre	51	51
Beaumont Hamel	157	157
Becordel-Bécourt	38	35
Bouzincourt	170	38
Buire-sur-Ancre	95	5
Contalmaison	54	54
Courcelette	87	87
Fricourt	178	178

Table 3: Levels of devastation in 12 red zone communes in the canton of Albert (ADS.99R3401).

[2] ADS.99R3401, S.R.R.L report, March 1921

Figure 14: The derelict shell of Notre Dame de Brébières in December 1918 (ADS.14J67/8).

The devastation wrought by the war was not confined to the villages of the canton alone. It enveloped the agricultural land which had formed a theatre of war on the Western Front between August 1914 and March 1917, March 1918 and August of the same year. In the wake of the Great war, the geographer Albert Demangeon described the landscape of the Western Front as a vast 'zone of death, 500 Km long and 10-25 Km broad, following the battle front in which good land has been transformed in to a desert, a wild steppe, where the very fields have erupted...'[3] The words appeared in the opening pages of *Le déclin de l'europe*, Demangeon's brutal assessment of the catastrophic effect of modern warfare on

[3] Clout, *After the Ruins: Restoring the Countryside of Northern France after the Great War* (Exeter, 1996), p.3.

European society; they would remain highly pertinent to the state of the farmland in Albert's canton throughout the 1920s. In Thiepval, over 95% of the farmland abandoned in August 1914, and obliterated in the artillery battles of 1915-6, lay deserted and fallow until the end of the following decade.[4] Much of the canton was in a sufficiently poor state to form what the Ministry for the Liberated Regions baptised the 'red zone.' The colour was employed by the ministry's topographers to map out the relief of the devastated regions. It would have a crucial bearing upon the commitment of the state towards any future restoration of the land. Red indicated areas across the western front where both levels of devastation and deposits of exploded munitions were at their most intense. In such areas it was assumed that the farmland had been rendered sterile, and that the cost of any future restoration would vastly outweigh the intrinsic value of the earth itself.[5] In the red zone the financial limitations of the reconstruction programme were starkly revealed. Here the state was prepared only to underwrite the purchase of farmland from pre-war landowners; state-financed restoration was not an option. Instead of attempting to return the earth to a state of productivity, it envisaged a large scale programme of reforestation. The creation of a *via sacra* was proposed, marking the trail of the Western Front across the ten departments with a tree lined avenue of remembrance. The rest of the wasteland would be superficially cleared of shells and allowed to grass over; deemed only fit as suitable pasture land for sheep. In 1919, the prefect of the Somme anticipated that approximately 28,000 hectares of Somme's earth would succumb in this way to the grand design of the Ministry for the Liberated Regions.[6] Demangeon's employment of the phrase 'zone of death' was thus strikingly appropriate. It

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[4] ADS.5Z70, Affaires Communales de Thiepval.

[5] Three colour codes were used to describe the relief of the post-war Western Front by the ministry for the liberated regions (red, yellow and blue). Each related to a descending level of devastation

[6] David de Sousa, *La reconstruction et sa mémoire dans les villages de la Somme (1918-1932)*, (Woignarue, 2001), p.20.

not only referred to the slaughter which had taken place across the department in 1914-18, but foresaw the likely death of the communities which had farmed its earth prior to the conflict, so improbable did it seem that the post-war Somme could once again sustain an agrarian way of life.

Countless other features could be added to the statistical overview of the red zone. Sixty million cubic metres of earth would be required to fill the maze of trenches, saps and tunnels gouged into the Somme's earth. Many hundreds of thousands of explosives remained in its fields. Some were unfired and remained in their shell-casings (this accounted for 30,000 tonnes of explosives), some littered the fields in exploded fragments, others had been fired, but had failed to detonate. Unexploded shells would inflict a constant toll of death and injury upon children, farmers and the teams charged with the task of *désobusage* throughout the period of reconstruction. In the first four months of 1921 alone, 81 separate accidents involving exploding munitions in the red zone resulted in the deaths of 42 people and injuries to a further 104.[7] There was also the presence of the war dead. Scattered throughout the red zone in varying degrees of decomposition, they awaited reburial in a military grave or transportation to the cemetery of a native commune. Approximately 419,000 soldiers lost their lives in the Somme between 1914-1918, the majority having been buried in the provisional military cemeteries and collective pits which dotted the western front landscape until the devastation wrought by the Spring offensive of 1918 exposed them once more.[8] In the first three post-war years of 1918-21, around twenty bodies per day were recovered from the fields of the red zone either by the farmers themselves, by the *fossoyeurs* employed by the French state, the Imperial War Graves Commission or the private exhumation companies

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[7] ADS.KZ2854, Report of the prefect, May 1921.

[8] Martin and Mary Middlebrook, *The Somme Battlefields*, (London, 1995). p.358.

whose advertisements were a constant feature in the post-war Somme press.[9] Mass slaughter on the Western Front had spawned what *L'oeuvre* described as 'une industrie fructueuse' drawing in new inhabitants to the ruins, through the lucrative salaries and tips which their profession offered:

> Grave digger! This sad trade is more or less the only one which takes place, the only one which the administration encourages in this land of death. Over the ruins of the villages, huts have grown. Families live there, who didn't live in the region in 1914. It is due to the immense and numerous cemeteries which are a source of revenue. Each exhumation- and there are in each sector between fifteen and twenty each day- brings home salaries, bonuses and tips. Looking after tombs is a lucrative industry. So long as the red zone lives off the dead, it will remain a land of death.[10]

Given the scale of the devastation across the Somme's front-line communes, and the very visible presence of the war dead in their surrounding fields, it is unsurprising that many writers seemed transfixed by a powerful sense of nihilistic despair whenever they encountered the red zone. What Demangeon termed a 'zone of death' in 1920, and *L'oeuvre* called 'a land of death' in 1921, Albert Londres, had described as a 'desert' when he travelled across the Somme in September 1918:

> If you wish to discover the greatest of all deserts, choose the Somme. There are no people, there are no plants. No one can be heard speaking, nothing can be seen growing...People use to live here and farm the land. Now it is finished.[11]

Metaphors suggesting a hopeless degree of sterility, or the work of an irresistible force of nature would be revisited again and again by journalists writing in the literary vein of

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[9] The existence of private exhumation companies was a response to legislation passed in the *Assemblée Nationale* in September 1920, which permitted families of the French soldiers to have their bodies transported from the Western Front and buried in a local cemetery. Jay Winter estimates that approximately 300,000 war dead were 'demobilised' in this way. See Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: the Great War in European Cultural History,* (Cambridge, 1995) p.26.

[10] ADS.246PER2 , *Le Journal de Péronne,* 6/02/21

[11] Albert Londres, *Contre le bourrage de crâne*, pp208-9.

Londres. Hugh Clout tells us that Léandre Vaillat imagined the devastation as 'a lava flow, submerging living beings, villages, towns, houses, forests, crops, running without a break between Nieuport and Bâle,' whilst Henri Thierry wrote of the battle-scarred landscape as 'the sea whose waves are formed by the rise and fall of shell holes.'[12] Similarly bleak was the language employed by the Ministry for the Liberated Regions, when their technical experts arrived to examine the earth of the red zone: one expert from the ministry concluded in 1919 that it would be 'madness' to undertake the restoration of Thiepval, a view with which the mayor of the commune fully concurred.[13]Viewed through the optic of these post-war writers and civil servants, it is difficult to imagine the red zone as anything other than a barren wilderness; a harsh countertype to the fecundity associated with the earth of *la France éternelle.* An alternative vision of the earth *did* emerge from the ruins however; one which countered the prevailing sense of despair by turning to familiar themes of nationalist ideology. Battlefield tourist books began to appear, inviting a more overtly patriotic contemplation of the land upon which the war had been fought. One of the most successful and widely read works of this genre was written by Maurice Barrès; *La Lorraine Dévastée* expressed the idea of a living soul presiding over the scenes of devastation and communicating to onlookers the eternal life source of France.[14] It was reprinted five times in 1919. The Somme's ruins were viewed from a similar perspective by Gaston Deschamps. Drawing attention away from the emotional scars of the conflict, Deschamps reminded his readers of the inviolable lineage which rooted peasants to the Somme, and the quintessential racial qualities they consequently possessed: :

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[12] Hugh Clout, *After the Ruins,* pp. 3-4.

[13] ADS.5Z70, Thiepval Affaires Communales. Ernest Ogez to the *sous-préfet,* October 1925. Ogez (the mayor of Thiepval from 1925) was referring to his predecessor, Paul Cathelain

[14] Maurice Barrès, *La Lorraine dévastée,* (Paris, 1919), p.23.

> The region on the banks of the Somme which the Germans have devastated is one of the original witnesses to the birth of our nation. The Frenchmen of Picardie belong to the elite; the oldest of the French.[15]

Patriotic visions of the ruins were also prevalent in newspapers throughout France. Implicit in *La Somme*, was the notion that the physical scars of war could serve to heal the memory of pre-war division. Thus construed, return to the ruins of a former home was a pilgrimage to the site of familial memory; an affirmation of the indivisible union between the peasant and his native earth:

> There was a time when the French disliked one another. To be exact, they misjudged one another. The war has changed this; in the trenches, facing the common peril, we have held out our hands to one another. It (the war) has brought hearts and souls so close together, that erstwhile enemies have become the best friends in the world. The war has made us love our country all the more. It required the Teutonic hordes to show us how passionately we are attached to the earth of our ancestors. And what is true of the nation is also true of the region, the native earth. One truly feels that one loves one's mother more when she is far away, or when she is with us no more; one understands the love one has for the church tower and the paternal home so much better when one has seen them collapse under an infernal shellfire.[16]

In the *Républicain Orléanais*, loyalty to the call of the native earth was but one of the qualities which defined the Somme's peasants. Here, the process of return from exile and reintegration in the ruins was demonstrative of a pioneering spirit which made them model Frenchmen:

> It has been said of the *Picard* that he is the perfect type of Frenchman : it would be impossible (for him) to possess more fully the essential qualities of our race. We mustn't stop repeating how marvellous it is to find in these decent people who hastened to their damaged earth to care for it and bring it back to life, so much quiet courage, so much good will and humour in the face of adversity. Nothing stops them. We asked whether it would ever be possible to restore the 28,000 hectares of the red zone: the cost of restoration would surpass the value of the land itself and the only solution seemed to be the its purchase by the state and its reforestation...But man has returned. He has responded to the call of the earth on which he was born, where he

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[15] Gaston Deschamps, *La Somme dévastée*, (Paris, 1919), p.38.
[16] ADS.263PER1, *La Somme*, August 1918.

> grew up, where he worked, and the task which once seemed impossible has not exceeded his strength and his will.[17]

Evident here was the ideological appeal cast by the ruins over post-war France. Familiar patriotic ideals of peasants stubbornly refusing to relinquish bonds with the earth hinted at a universal catharsis and were being used to shape the collective memory of the now silent Western Front. What is striking about the portrayal of exiled peasants making the return journey to the ruins in *La Somme* and *Le Républican Orléanais* however, is not merely its fusion with a particular ideal of rural France, but the unequivocal way in which this was gendered. The peasant was returning to *his* earth; return was thus 'pioneered' by masculine figures who had fought for their country and had drawn strength from the deep bond of brotherhood uniting all true Frenchmen in the trenches. By the terms in which these articles portrayed the act of return, the female refugee appeared as a peripheral figure, unworthy of mention. This was not simply a reflection of mass-demobilisation and the reappearance of a male figure amongst exiled families. It indicated a desire to rebuild the post-war family, the village community and indeed the nation around the masculine authority of the *poilu*. The female figure, so frequently called upon to evoke the virtues of the French soil in pre-war art and literature appeared profoundly inappropriate as a symbol of regeneration. The fecundity of *la semeuse* had been tainted by the shadow of the *enfant-Boche*; she had acquired the persona of Clothilde, the unfaithful wife of Poterloo in Barbusse's *Le feu*, or the *femme galante*, a syphilitic contaminator of the *poilu*. Far safer was the paternal image of the returning soldier, a peasant endowed with the physical strength to rebuild the shattered earth and the moral authority to guide the errant female. The striking absence of female representation was not limited to patriotic visions of return to the Somme's ruins, but reflected the ideological slant which shaped post-war remembrance: Ruth Harris points out

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[17] ADS.99M48, *Le Républicain Orléanais et du Centre*, 19 June 1921.

that the commemoration of the 1914-18 conflict 'as a time of national heroism and solidarity, exemplified by the stolid image of the poilu, the French infantryman, and the unflinching support of the civilian population...excluded the reality of dissent and disenchantment in general and perceptions of national victimisation and sexual disloyalty in particular.'[18]

Patriotic mythologies of exiled peasants and the call of the ancestral earth responded to a collective psychological need. Communities across the interior of France, which watched refugees gradually disappear from their midst, required a a safer, more inclusive vision of national identity to counter the memories of wartime social division. Refugees who had borne the brunt of wartime invective, typified by phrases such as *les Boches du nord*, likewise embraced post-war myths of patriotism, signalling as they did, a release from the very public scrutiny of their moral transgressions. For communities in the interior and across the ruins, there was also a singular need to find meaning in the trauma of 1914-18, and the messiness of the physical and social debris which remained in its aftermath. Nowhere could the cathartic notion of national rebirth be demonstrated in such a tangible and meaningful form than in the reappearance of village life across the killing fields of the Western Front. Volunteer emergency organisations such as *La Somme Dévastée, La Renaissance de Foyers, Le Village Reconstitué, Le Foyer des Campagnes and Le Comité Américain pour les Régions Dévastées* (C.A.R.D) which operated across the devastated regions, reflected this collective desire.[19]C.A.R.D operated predominantly in the department of Aisne, providing village halls, libraries (stocked with carefully chosen patriotic works from Barrès and Aimé Giron) and organising local *fêtes de la victoire.*[20] *Le Foyer des Campagnes* was created in 1919 and

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[18] Harris, 'The "Child of the Barbarian": Rape, Race and Nationalism in France during the First World War, p.205.
[19] ADS.KZ1540, Coordination des Secours, October 1919.
[20] Anne Dopffer, "Le comité américain pour les régions dévastées" in *Reconstructions en Picardie Après 1918*, (Paris, 2000), p.82.

supported in its work by the Ministry of the Interior. Its regenerative mission echoed Jules Méline's pre-war vision of reversing the dynamics of rural decay by reviving the union between the peasant and his earth. Posters depicting contented families of an *enraciné* peasantry were dispatched by *Le Foyer des Campagnes* to the *chefs-lieux* of the Somme's devastated cantons, urging their mayors to espouse the moral ideal of reconstruction and provide the ruined villages with community halls. Build them 'like we once built cathedrals', they urged:

> In this 'home', you will find everything that makes one healthy; youth sports associations, theatre, concerts, social and family events, a library; a place where people may gather to both celebrate their liberation and remember the dead...Its creators have already established several bases in the liberated regions; they have brought to everyone a happier way of life. For their children, their young women, young men, adults and the elderly (they have become) a second home...by the creation of these village halls, you will liberate yourselves from the slavery of alcoholism, through it, a sense of fraternity will be created, through it, you will once more taste the joy of life.[21]

The resurrection of *home* in the Somme in the aftermath of 1918 thus implied far more than a physical act of reconstruction with bricks and cement. It necessitated the espousal of ideals which sought to validate victory by denying pre-war division and casting post-war hardships in a positive, patriotic light. Given the psychological necessities of these myths and the entrenched position they would assume in the collective identity of the Somme's inhabitants in the post-war period, it is inevitable that a singularly idealised perspective has assumed a dominant position in the modern memory of post-war reconstruction. Historians who approach the ruins of the Somme and the red zones of its fellow war-torn departments, invariably do so with the ghost of Maurice Barrès guiding their thoughts. Thus, when Professor Philippe Nivet examined the complex issue of the refugees who returned to the

[21] ADS.KZ101, Foyer des Campagnes.

Somme and Oise, he was keen to confine his argument within the ideological framework of the original myth:

> Ultimately, the refugees hoped to rediscover their *petite patrie*. Love of the native earth, of the town or village where they were born, a sense of attachment to the cemetery where loved ones lay and to the familiar horizon they had looked upon since their youths...[22]

Gérard Lobry also wrote a chapter in *Reconstructions en Picardie*, focussing upon the poverty of refugees and the wretched material conditions they faced in the provisional communes of Aisne. Though considerably more vigorous in his exploration of post-war hardship amongst the earliest of the reintegrated communities, echoes of the myth prevailed, obliging Lobry to point towards the relation between a hasty return to the ruins and the desire to become a *bon picard* by renewing the sacred bond with 'the good earth of former times.'[23] David de Sousa's *La reconstruction et sa mémoire dans les villages de la Somme (1918-1932)* restricted its attention to the geographical parameters of the red zone in the arrondissement of Péronne. Nevertheless, in the midst of the most intense area of devastation, a sense of 'home' rooted in familial memory and communal traditions- retained its sacred position at the forefront of the author's mind. *Home* remained an unshakeable doctrine of faith in the heart of the peasant who was able to survey the wretched landscape of the red zone and yet still sustain the belief : 'c'est tout de meme chez-nous'. [24]

It would be unduly harsh to dismiss these arguments as a mere aping of the ideological formulae served up by novelists and journalists in the 1920s and 1930s. The power of the myth in that period did not simply reside in its ability to provide a cathartic vision of the

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[22] Philippe Nivet, "Le retour des réfugiés" in *Reconstructions en Picardie* p.24
[23] Ibid. p.38
[24] David de Sousa, *La reconstruction et sa mémoire* p. 16.

ruins; it was also a plausible representation of the regeneration (both social and physical) which had taken place. Viewed from the vantage point of 1931 and 1932 when newly bronzed church and town hall bells announced the completion and inauguration of communes throughout the department, memories of the struggles which had dominated the politics of reconstruction in the 1920s, tended to lose their sharp edge. Red zone villages initially condemned to death by decrees from the Ministry for the Liberated Regions in 1919 had been rebuilt; farmland deemed worthless and suitable only for woodland had been restored and farmed once more, the scars it retained in 1932 often being purposefully preserved to satisfy the curiosity of the battlefield tourist. Above all, thousands of peasants who had been exiled from their villages since August 1914 had let neither time nor distance weaken bonds of regional attachment. For de Sousa and Nivet, population movements in the post-1918 period appear to provide unquestionable proof of the reality of *l'amour du sol natal.* On this issue, de Sousa is particularly persuasive. Though the Somme was severely depopulated at the time of the 1921 census, he points out that its exiles returned in their droves over the following five years. At the time of subsequent head-count (in 1926) the war-torn department had recovered the majority of its pre-war inhabitants.[25] Equally pertinent is de Sousa's insight to the intense political debate which both preceded and to some extent dominated the Mayors' Congress of July 1919. At the first post-war assembly of its kind, the newly appointed prefect, Alfred Morain advised mayors from the cantons of Albert, Combles, Péronne and Chaulnes (the Somme's red zone) to accept the Ministry for the Liberated Region's offer to purchase (but not to restore) the farmland surrounding their communes. The advice was emphatically rejected. [26] In Albert's canton, the mobilisation of political support for the *restoration* of the earth in the red zone would be particularly

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[25] Ibid.,p.52.
[26] Ibid.,pp.19-23.

apparent. In the week which followed the Mayors' Congress, 15 villages formed the *Fédération Paysanne d'Albert.* Its aim was to empower the peasant, the landlord and anyone with a financial or investment or familial link to the locality against the arbitrary diktats which were emerging from Paris.[27]However logical the financial equation dictating the future of red zone may have appeared to the ministry in Paris, it is clear from this example of dissent that feelings of attachment and loyalty to a particular village could not be so clinically divorced from the reconstruction issue. *L'amour du sol natal* had seemingly rendered the very concept of a distinct (and worthless) red zone, meaningless.

In Philippe Nivet's work, we encounter a similarly powerful representation of *l'amour du sol natal.* Nivet's principal sources are the letters scrawled by peasants, anxious to return to *their* earth, to a local mayor or prefect. They now lie in the departmental archives of Oise. Correspondence of this nature is equally abundant in the Somme's archives and likewise draws attention to a collective desire of the red zone's pre-war inhabitants to endure the hardship of the ruins. Thus, on 7 July 1918 (a month before Albert's occupation ended) one such letter was sent by Charles Queret (a bookshop owner and printer in Albert prior to 1914) to the *sous-préfet* of Péronne:

> Despite the difficulties of supplies and whatever privations I may face in the following winter, I have no intention of 'gathering mildew' for any longer in Selincourt (Queret's town of refuge) where life has become too monotonous...[28]

For Mme Lassal-Cuviller, a local shopkeeper in Albert, concern over potential competition for provisional housing (wooden huts or corrugated iron *nissen* huts were provided by the

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[27] ADS.KZ252, Assemblée Generale, 26 July 1919

[28] ADS.5Z57, Albert, Affaires Communales. Charles Queret to the *sous-préfet*, 7 July 1918.

state and rented to returnees) prompted a letter to the *sous-préfet* in October 1918. This was two months before the town was officially made accessible to returning civilians:

> I am writing to ask whether we are going to be given huts. Since the war, it has always been the same people who have been favoured- either farmers or industrialists. I had a small business in Albert (a stationery shop) and therefore ask to be one of the first to gain authorisation to return. The privilege should be accorded to those who are prepared to work, not to the profiteers who have behaved badly since the beginning of the war.[29]

Three kilometres the north-west of Albert, in the village of Bouzincourt, the *adjoint* to the mayor (the mayor himself had lost an arm during the bombardment of the village in September 1916[30]) informed the *sous-préfet* in October 1918, that 60 local farmers were determined to harvest whatever land remained cultivable around the commune. They asked only for the provision of tarred cardboard to make emergency repairs to their homes.[31]Two months later, the mayor of Méaulte, Henri Potez, dispelled the doubts which had surrounded his sudden departure in August 1914, by signalling his desire to leave Angers and take up office in the ruined village, as soon as a provisional shelter could be provided.[32] Abel Pifre had been similarly disgraced by his departure from Aveluy to Paris at the beginning of the war, but his own political ambition for the office of mayor of Albert ensured that he too, was unwilling to remain exiled in Paris. The local popularity generated by the speed of his return to the town's ruins would prove crucial in his defeat of Emile Leturcq in the 1919 municipal election. Patriotic duty and political ambition prevailed elsewhere in the canton: Bazentin's mayor, M. Demonchaux saw active service on the Western Front following his escape from a

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[29] ADS.5Z57, Albert, Affaires Communales. Mme Lassal-Cuviller to the *sous-préfet*, October 1918.
[30] ADS.99M231, report of the Mission Militaire Attachée à l'Armée Britanique, September 1916.
[31] ADS.5Z10, Bouzincourt, Affaires Communales.
[32] ADS.5Z50, Méaulte, affaires communales, Potez to the *sous-préfet*, 11 December 1918.

prisoner of war camp in 1915, and was awarded the *Croix de Guerre*. He resumed office in the village in 1919; in Fricourt, M.Danicourt had been threatened with execution during the German occupation of the village in 1914-16, but returned to the ruins of his chateau and briefly took over mayoral responsibilities.[33] Beyond Albert's canton, official visitors undertaking an assessment of Ham's *bilan de guerre* in August 1918 were astonished to find a community of 15 inhabitants already living there. Hiding in cellars, they had evaded capture during the German Spring Offensive of March 1918, and survived the artillery bombardment unleashed by the British in response.

The sheer number of returnees to the Somme in 1918-19 lends much credence to the arguments put forward by Nivet and de Sousa. So too does the desire of most returnees (evident in their correspondence with local mayors), to be considered true *indéracinables* of the region. It is important however, that we take a step beyond the ideological parameters of wartime and post-war mythology. To do otherwise, is to ignore the striking emptiness which pervaded many of the villages in the heart of red zone; to overlook the dominant presence of foreigner labourers in the post-war townships and the violent crime which was rife amongst their communities; to gloss over the embitterment fostered amongst the reintegrated communities towards the rest of France and to forget the ways in which they exploited their own patriotic myths to serve a political end. How then might we challenge the myth of *l'amour du sol natal* and examine more thoroughly the social make-up of the communities which settled in the Somme? It seems appropriate to approach the issue of post-war resettlement by firstly surveying the physical structure of the provisional towns themselves. This may not reveal the identities of the earliest returnees, but it provides a context in which the presence of some and the absence of others may be more fruitfully explored.

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[33] ADS.5Z35, Fricourt, affaires communales.

Presence and Absence in Albert's Provisional Town

Due to the extent of Albert's destruction, four months passed between the town's liberation (August 1918) and the granting of the first civilian *sauf-conduits* by the Prefecture in December of that year. In the interim period a primary search for grenades, shells and mines took place amongst the rubble of the town by the STPU. The initial number of returnees in the final month of 1918 was 22. They inhabited a limited number of ex-army huts scattered around the outskirts of the ruins with few provisions beyond the supply of mattresses, essential fuel and food stocks. For the following six months the reintegrated community of Albert existed without the basic infrastructure of municipal life. Until April of that year, there was no gendarmerie in either Albert or the communes of its canton. Prior to July, no post office, telephone or telegraphic system linking the inhabitants of the red zone to the territories beyond. Emile Leturcq's return to the town -timed to coincide with the erection of a provisional town hall- did not take place until June.[34] As most of the cantonal archives had been either destroyed or dispersed to various towns of refuge (from the *Sous-Préfecture* in Abbeville to the *Palais de Justice* in Rouen) the reinstallation of municipal administration across the red zone amounted to little more than the allocation of a hut of suitable size. In the commune of Ovillers-la-Boisselle for example, the mayor's office remained virtually empty for a full year after the armistice, lacking a stove, a table, a chair, a lamp, a polling booth, even a municipal stamp of office.[35]

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[34] ADS.99R3401 S.R.R.L report, March 1921

[35] ADS.5Z59 La Boisselle, Affaires Communales.

Albert's provisional town initially consisted of 131 provisional dwellings. A mixture of corrugated iron nissen huts (known locally as *demi-lunes* or *métros* due to their half cylindrical form) and wooden huts had been erected by the S.R.R.L. in anticipation of the first wave of returnees in the Winter months of 1918/19. By March 1919 they were inhabited by a population of 150; the milder spring weather which then followed drew in a considerably larger influx of refugees. By then, the problems of providing adequate forms of shelter had become increasingly acute across the red zone as a whole. In part, this was due to the reluctance of many refugees to provide the department with warning of their imminent arrival. According to the prefect's report in April 1919 only 9,105 of the 39,787 population of settlers in the red zone (a ratio of less than 1 to 4) had returned to their ruined villages *with* authorisation from their mayor. This placed considerable strain on the stocks of provisional houses and domestic items in Amiens. Morain stated that throughout this period, the department had at its disposal only 9,150 beds, 6,300 mattresses, 1,500 blankets, 33,000 plates, 2,500 pots and 22,000 sets of knives and forks. Provisional housing stocks (largely acquired from the British army) and emergency building materials should have been available in far greater abundance, but they had been held up by the poor reliability of the rolling stock provided by the *Compagnie du Nord* to serve the red zone.[36] This was so across the Western Front as a whole, where only '8,000 huts of various shapes and sizes' were erected by the emergency services in the first nine months of peace.[37] One consequence of the supply problems in the red zone was the universal practice of 'skimming' ruined villages and their fields for items of potential value of utility. Anticipating the inevitable flood of scavengers (in September 1918), the prefect had authorised returnees to hunt in the trenches for 'any doors, window or items of furniture which they recognised as belonging to them.'[38]

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[36] ADS.KZ1540, Report of the prefect, April 1919.
[37] Hugh Clout, *After the Ruins*, p.164.
[38] ADS.KZ465, Prefect to the *sous-préfet* of Péronne, September 1918

Given the number of explosives remaining in the soil, the practise was fraught with danger. It was also necessary. Bereft of the essential items of classroom furniture, even local school teachers took the risk of leading their classes to the trenches in order to search for useful items. One former pupil of the village school in Tincourt recalled that *récupération* was a regular event in the 1919 school timetable:

> We had a classroom, but there was no furniture. With milk churns and planks, we made benches. Lessons took place in the morning. In the afternoon we went on *récupération*; teachers and pupils explored the trenches in order to gather whatever the soldiers had left; planks to make tables, a door to serve as a blackboard...the classroom had windows but no glass. We had received a delivery of window panes, but had nothing to cut them with.[39]

Unsurprisingly, school attendance in the Somme's red zone was low. Across the department as a whole, it had declined dramatically in the latter stages of the Great War[40], and this trend continued in its aftermath. The necessity of daily searches for items of domestic utility ensured that many red zone children stayed away from the classroom. The *vagabondage* of children in villages such as Fricourt was a cause of concern to the *sous-préfet* of Péronne.[41]In Albert, attempts to lure errant children away from the battlefields and into the classrooms were made by the local councillor M.Quentin, who promised free tickets in the town's cinema hall to the four most frequent attendees in each class.[42]

Poverty and a general scarcity of supplies were but two of the factors which contributed to the culture of scavenging. Returnees also suffered at the hands of the government agencies

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[39] René Lavalard and Robert Embry, *1914-18: La reconstruction dans la Somme et les régions dévastées* (Péronne, 1996), p.24.
[40] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *La guerre des enfants 1914-18: essai d'historie culturelle,* (Paris, 1996) p.62-3.
[41] ADS.5Z35, Fricourt, affaires communales. By November 1920, the *sous-prefet* was able to congratulate the local teacher, Mlle Magnier on improving attendance in the school.
[42] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 31 October 1920.

created to ease their hardships. Hugh Clout rightly observes that state run organisations such as the STPU and its successor the STE, fuelled much anger and resentment across the devastated regions. Overriding the concerns of local mayors and their prefects, as well as ignoring the specific needs of returnees themselves, the emergency organisations were accused of operating according to the principle of 'l'état c'est moi.'[43] The STPU was responsible for the clearance of rubble away from the provisional towns. Albert itself was criss-crossed by STPU narrow-gauge railway tracks, for this very purpose. Though it was a vital primary step towards the reconstruction of the town, an element of controversy reigned over the rights of ownership of the rubble. According to article 60 of the April 1919 law on war damages, the state reserved the right to demolish any building which it saw fit, and in consequence, possessed the rights to the rubble it had created. Only the household possessions within a condemned building remained the rightful property of the returnee.[44] Practical though the measure was, it invited a state-sponsored form of profiteering. In Albert, the council protested to the prefect against the policies of the *district*, which arbitrarily took precious building materials away from the town and then sold them on to villages in other cantons. Their anger was understandable. Though provisional huts, erected and reserved for SRRL workers lay empty in Albert, [45] the town's returnees were heavily reliant upon the rubble for the construction of their own dwellings.[46]

Resentment also surfaced over the price of the building materials available to the returnees. Reclaimed bricks in the material depots of the SRRL were being sold off for 144 francs per thousand in April 1920, a 400% price rise on pre-war prices. Whilst the price was roughly in line with inflation, it left the original owners of the bricks bemused as to why they were

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[43] Clout, *After the Ruins*, p.106.
[44] De Sousa, *la reconsruction et sa mémoire*, p.31.
[45] AMA. Council minutes, April 1920.
[46] ADS.KZ1540, STE report, October 1920. 320 houses constructed from rubble (out of a total housing stock of 928) were recorded in the report.

being charged at all.[47] Iniquitous price hikes on building materials had a particularly profound effect on the red zone's more isolated communes. Due to the total destruction of the roadways beyond the front-line of July 1916 (approximately 3 km north east of Albert), a *barème des pourcentages de plus-value pour transports supplèmentaires* was established, creating a sliding scale of material and labour costs. The cost of reconstruction would therefore vary from village to village throughout the red zone, according to their ease of access from material depots. Albert's privileged position on a main line railway station meant that it was unaffected by transportation costs, but inhabitants in communes without easy access to the major highway of the Bapaume road, were less fortunate. In Bazentin (10 Km east of Albert) total costs for materials and labour were between 10-12% more expensive than in Albert; reconstruction in Fricourt and Mametz, (two other villages lacking a major roadway through to Albert) was between 5 and 9% more expensive.[48] It was unsurprising therefore, that local inhabitants took to the dangerous occupation of searching the trenches and the ruins themselves, in order to avoid the costs inherent in their reliance upon the government's reconstruction agencies. Méaulte's mayor, Henri Potez had somewhat naively advised his own villagers to take only what belonged to them, when they returned to the village at the end of the war. By the end of 1919, he had received numerous complaints from exiles whose homes had been stripped of domestic items and building materials by their neighbours, or *écumeurs* (skimmers) shifting from commune to commune. Soldiers present in the red zone appeared to be aiding rather than policing the process.[49] In Albert itself, the desire of one industrialist to recover materials rather than repurchase them from the state, led to his death; Raymond Duchateau, the owner of a building company, was killed when a 6

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[47] AMA. Council Minutes, July 1920.
[48] ADS.10R25, Dommages de guerre.
[49] ADS.5Z50, Méaulte, affaires communales Henri Potéz to the prefect, November 1919. One villager of Méaulte complained that when she confronted a French soldier about his role in the theft of items from her home, she received the ubiquitous reply 'cest la guerre.'

metre deep trench collapsed on top of him, as he was searching for wooden beams during a night time excursion in to the fields in November 1919.[50]

Reports from 1920 suggest that around 30% of the town's population inhabited what were euphemistically termed 'repaired houses' or 'houses constructed from diverse materials.'[51] Generally this implied a makeshift dwelling constructed from the rubble and timber of the ruins, a cellar cleared of the bricks, rubble and explosives with which it had been filled in 1918, or in the most extreme of cases an 'emergency shelter' (*logement de fortune*), constructed almost entirely from tar coated cardboard. Levels of comfort in dwellings of this nature were low. Depicting the interior in one of the many *logements de fortune* of the red zone, Gérard Lobry describes earth floors, corrugated iron roofs and windows substituted by oiled paper as typical features. Inhabitants of such shelters were often deprived of the most basic domestic possessions. Oil lamps and stoves recovered from trench dugouts served as the predominant form of lighting and heating. Furniture, bed clothes and cooking equipment were likewise 'quasi inexistant' and would be procured from the same source. Beds generally consisted of four planks nailed together, mattresses from sacking filled with straw, wood chippings or other forms of detritus. In the canton of Craonne (Oise) conditions of this nature were so harsh as to threaten the lives of the young children who returned with their families. Each night throughout the winter months, fires were maintained 'To prevent the children from freezing to death from the ice.'[52]

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[50] BCA.45.356, *L'Avenir d'Albert*, December 1919.
[51] ADS.99R3401, SRRL report, March 1921
[52] Gérard Lobry, "La vie au provisoire" in *Reconstructions en Picardie*, p.40.

Date	Population
July 1914	7,343
31 December 1918	22
31 May 1919	150
31 July 1919	545
30 September 1919	996
15 October 1919	1,150
1 January 1920	1,195

Table 4: Population growth in Albert's provisional town. Bimonthly population statistics were compiled by the prefect until November 1920 (ADS.99R3401).

Similarly wretched conditions existed in many of the nissens and wooden huts of the Somme's provisional towns. Reporting on the red zone in the arrondissement of Péronne, *Le Petit Journal* observed that the blackened dwellings of its towns gave the region the appearance of being in prolonged mourning. The particular colour which distinguished the provisional buildings of the Somme from those which remained intact, was derived from the copious amounts of tarred cardboard (supplied in giant rolls to each commune by the SRRL) to provide emergency repairs.[53] Often constructed from unseasoned or seriously deteriorated wood, the housing stocks of the provisional towns provided a notoriously unpleasant form of shelter for the returnees. Remarking on the arrival of the *période pluviose*, the *Gazette de Péronne* wrote that whilst the rain was clearly essential for the earth, it was greeted with considerably less enthusiasm by those whose dwellings were held together by such material; in such cases it was common for the inhabitant to go to bed equipped with an umbrella.[54] Sanitation and drainage within the provisional towns represented a problem of similar proportions to that of its housing. In June 1922, 85% of the red zone's water wells remained undrinkable;[55] in Albert, where refuse collections had ceased upon the mobilisation of

[53] ADS.241 PER 2 , *La Gazette de Péronne* 31 October 1920. Descriptions from *Le Petit Journal* are quoted in this edition.
[54] ADS.241PER2 , *La Gazette de Péronne*, 5 December 1920.
[55] ADS.99M97023/5 Bulletins de L'Inspection Départemental d'Hygiene, 1922.

August 1914, the derelict shells of bombed houses provided the principal dumping ground for the town's rubbish until the service was reinstated in September 1923.[56] Rat populations, abundant throughout the war years, would explode in the post-war townships of the red zone.[57] The total absence of drainage in one of Albert's provisional *cités* built on the outskirts of the ruins prompted the *Gazette de Péronne* to describe its housing as 'aquarium-baraques' and report a general state of filth in the streets around them in which disease was rife.[58]Departmental Hygiene inspection reports affirm the validity of the comment. Albert, with a population of 3,040, in April 1921, recorded just 1 less case of T.B than Amiens (population, 92,780); typhoid cases were seven times higher in Albert and dysentery cases were twenty times higher; death rates in the red zone as a whole were above the national average.[59] Circulation in the types of provisional quarter described by the *Gazette de Péronne*, was particularly hazardous at night.[60] Lacking any form of electricity prior to July 1920, provisional communes across the canton were plunged in to darkness, making a passage through the piles of rubble, pools of stagnant water, rubbish heaps and endless bundles of barbed wire (brought from the fields by metal searchers and farmers), possible only with a lantern or with the aid of a full moon.[61]

The general state of filth and disease which existed in provisional towns across the red zone, provoked a sense of shock in the national press. *Le Matin* and *Le Peuple* were particularly vocal in their campaigns to illustrate the distresses of resettlement in the ruins. *Le Peuple* went so far as to describe red zone inhabitants as living like 'savages' and 'troglodytes'.[62] Apt

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[56] AMA.Council minutes, September 1923.
[57] ADS.99M97203/5 Bulletin de l'Inspection Départemental d'Hygiene, July 1919.
[58] ADS.241PER2 , *La Gazette de Péronne,* 18 January 1921.
[59] ADS.99M970203/5 Bulletin de l'Inspection Départmental d'Hygiene, 1923.
[60] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 5 December 1920.
[61] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne,* 31 October 1920.
[62] Clout, *After the Ruins,* pp. 163-4.

though the descriptions may have been for those forced to inhabit the hopelessly inadequate *logements de fortune*, it is however, an incomplete perspective of life in Albert's provisional town. As well as possessing several 'troglodyte' quarters, it should be noted that the town in 1921 was equipped with 52 cafes and bars, 4 hotels and *estaminets,* 8 dress makers, 3 fabric shops, 2 hat shops, 6 restaurants , 2 wine merchants, 2 watch repairers and a cinema. Six hundred businesses had been established in the town prior to the Great War. A not inconsiderable figure of 257 businesses had been re-established in its provisional huts and nissens.[63]

Figure 15: A nissen home in Beaumont-Hamel (ADS.10R628).

To those living in the comparatively primitive settlements of the red zone (in Miraumont the local mayor complained that in the first six months of their reintegration, his inhabitants had failed to receive any supplies of food or fuel from central stocks in Amiens;[64]) the

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[63] ADS.6M16/1, Albert, census returns 1921.

[64] ADS.5Z53, Miraumont, Affaires Communales.

provisional town of Albert represented a bustling economic centre; with its critical location along a main line of the *Chemin de Fer du Nord,* it was also a key centre of heavy material distribution for the entire red zone. With a population in early 1921 of over 3,000 inhabitants, Albert was *the* major location for French and foreign workers involved in the definitive reconstruction of the Somme's roads railways and bridges, as well as the provisional construction of its makeshift dwellings.

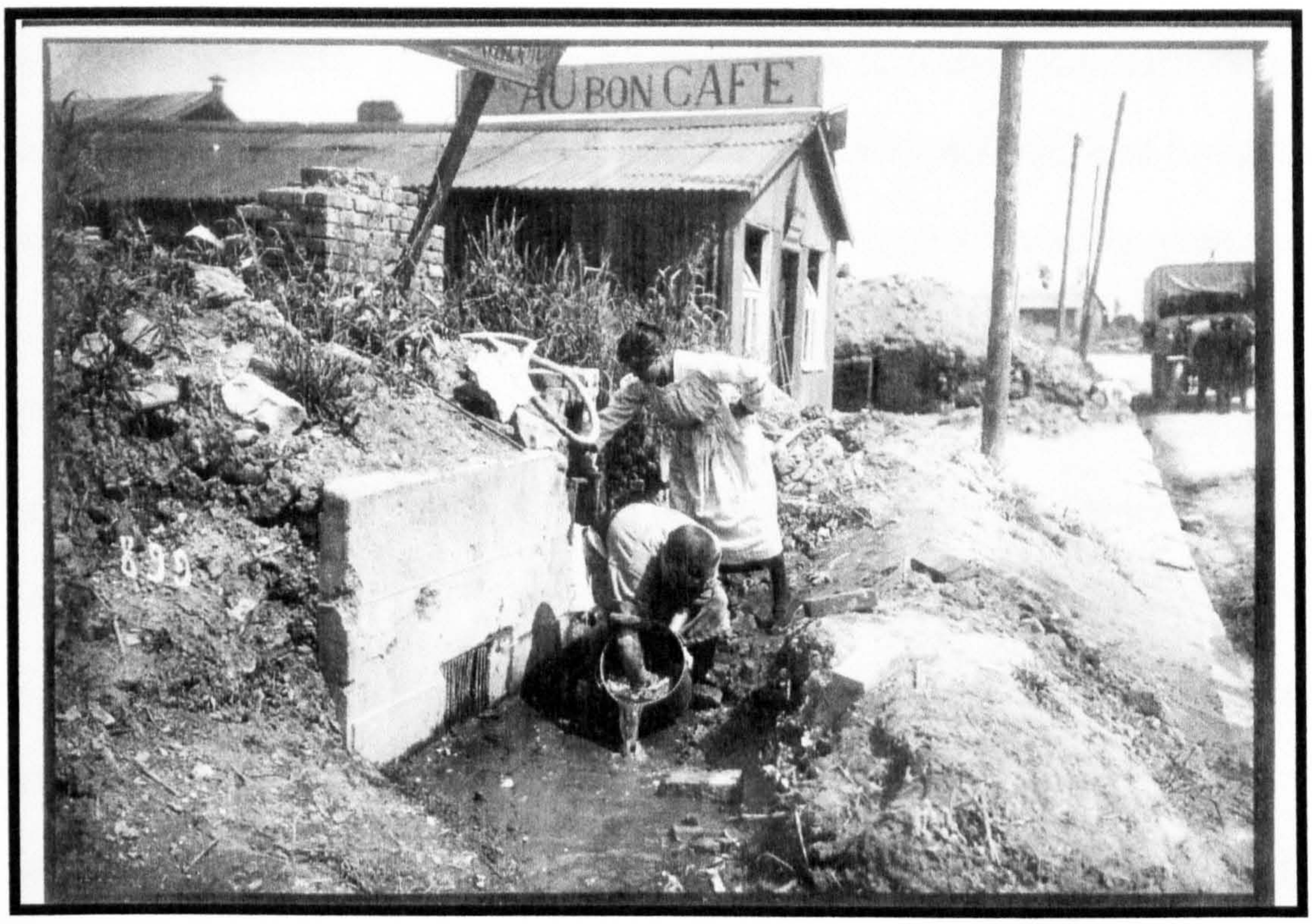

Figure 16: The provisional town of Albert (ADS2FI231).

The Somme and its *Exotiques*

The massive presence of foreign workers across the devastated regions of the Western Front draws attention to the demographic and social realities behind the myth of post-war resettlement. Literary visions of pioneering Somme peasants, seeking out the beloved ruins of

a former village, and toiling patriotically on the restoration of *their* earth in the 1920s, made little reference to the foreigners living and working alongside them.[65]In the post-war Somme however, labourers drawn from 22 different nations in Europe, North America, South America, Asia and Australia formed an important element in the reconstruction workforce. Colonial labourers from North Africa were also a significant presence.[66] Far from fulfilling the ideal of *la petite patrie* , the red zone's communities of multinational *déracinés* were its very antithesis. In Albert, the number of foreign workers stood at 1,000 in 1920; over 33% of the town's total population. This was before a major influx of Italian, Spanish and Portuguese workers took place in 1922 and 1923. In the Somme as a whole, the number of foreigners recorded on the 1921 census was 12,878, and whilst this was merely a fraction of the foreign population inhabiting the neighbouring department of Nord (155,972), it represented a rise of 256.7% on pre-war totals, a figure unsurpassed across the devastated regions.[67] France in the 1920s, as John Horne points out, 'was second only to the United States of America as an industrialised immigrant society.'[68] Unsurprisingly, the devastated northern departments of Aisne, Ardennes, Marne, Meuse, Meurthe-et-Moselle, Nord, Oise, Pas-de-Calais, Somme and Vosges housed the largest proportion of foreigners.[69] Foreign workers (and likewise Frenchmen from the interior) were attracted to the ruins by the lucrative wages offered by the reconstruction companies. In Albert, labourers received an average hourly rate of between 3,25 and 3,75 Francs. Many drew wages which were calculated against the sum total of work they were able to accomplish, and for a brick layer, this added up to around 35 Francs per

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[65] The one exception to this is Roland Dorgelès's 1923 novel *Le Réveil des Morts.*
[66] ADS.99M107834, Régistre d'Immatriculation, Arrondissement de Péronne, 1919-20.
[67] Clout, *After the Ruins*, p.152.
[68] John Horne, "Immigrant Workers in France During World War 1" in *French Historical Studies,* Vol.14. No.1 (Spring 1985), p.57.
[69] See Horne, "Immigrant Workers in France During World War 1" in *French Historical Studies,* vol.14. No.1, p.59 and Clout, *After the Ruins*, p.152.

cubic metre of building work.[70] In the estimation of the prefect, a builder working a ten hour day could thus earn around 59 francs.[71] A similar method of calculation was applied to much of the agricultural work in the canton, particularly the levelling of the fields and the filling of its many shell craters. Here, labourers were earning up to 150 Francs per hectare by August 1920, with an extra 20% added in *zones de grand bombardement.*[72] This as David de Sousa suggests, was a line of work open to considerable exploitation by those charged with accomplishing the task: many craters, though giving the impression of having been filled and levelled would merely be blocked over with corrugated iron or planks of wood and then disguised with a superficial covering of top soil.[73] Similar inefficiencies had dogged the initial execution of shell clearance; carried out at the end of the war by prisoners of war under the charge of the STPU, many shells had simply been thrown back in to shell holes and covered with earth.[74] To ensure a more productive form of shell clearance, private companies took over the contract and offered lucrative wages to any war veterans who were prepared to lead their teams. Advertisements which appeared in the *Bulletin Départemental de la Réconstitution des Régions Libérées de la Somme* in November 1919 promised suitable applicants a daily rate of 15 Francs during a training period in Paris, rising by 100% when the training was completed.[75] Grave diggers, as we have seen from the comments in *L'Ouevre,* were as well paid as the shell clearance teams working alongside them. For each dead soldier

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[70] These salaries may be compared with the refugee allocation upon which many of the Somme's returnees would depend, amounted to no more than 1,50 francs a day. Widows and orphans of the war received a slightly higher wage, calculated at 50 francs per month. 'Mutilés' of the Great War (if suffering from total debilitation) received just under 5 francs per day. It is worth noting that the *Restaurant du Centre* (one of the provisional town's all night bars) provided three course meals at 6 francs in 1920.

[71] ADS.10R26, Prefect to the Ministre des Régions Libérées, 19 December 1922

[72] ADS.KZ2864, Prefet's report, March 1921.

[73] De Sousa, *la reconstruction et sa mémoire,* p.33

[74] Hugh Clout, *After the Ruins,* p.95

[75] ADS.10 R26 , *Bulletin de la Reconstitution des Régions Liberées de la Somme,* 27 November 1919

returned on the wishes of his family to his native village, the exhumation company charged with the responsibility received the following sums: 15 francs per exhumation, 15 francs for care of the corpse during its transportation, 3 francs per kilometre from the *gare régulatrice* to the local cemetery and 20 francs for the soldier's final burial.[76]

The obvious necessity of a foreign workforce in the devastated regions of the Somme did little to temper the social-Darwinian anxieties which had infused the pre-war rhetoric of sickness. In 1921, *Le Journal de Péronne* viewed repopulating of the red zone from such a perspective and demanded:

> How in the era of peace can we defend ourselves against the foreign invasion? Nature has a horror of emptiness, as our forefathers showed us. Depopulated lands call out to overpopulated ones; there exist migratory currents, just as there exist atmospheric currents.'[77]

In the Socialist journal, *La Voix des Ruines*, an editorial entitled *Colonisation* was similarly hostile. English grave diggers were deemed to be a social residuum, exported by *la loyale Albion* to ease its own unemployment problems, rather than to provide any meaningful contribution to the rebuilding of France; 'we already have too many undesirables, too many *soleils* from Barcelona or Macaroni country in our ruins' it concluded.[78] The antipathy expressed in *La Voix des Ruines* towards a wartime ally, largely reflected concerns over post-war inflation, a trend which the high price of British coal exports (the coal fields of Pas-de-Calais and Nord having been flooded or destroyed in 1914-18) had exacerbated. British ambivalence over issues of German reparation payments and war crimes trials for the atrocities of September and October 1914 were likewise contributory factors. Attitudes

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[76] ADS.246PER2, *Le Journal de Péronne,* 13 March 1921.
[77] ADS.246PER2, *Le Journal de Péronne*, 13 February 1921.
[78] ADS.265PER1, *La Voix des Ruines*, 13 April 1921.

towards other foreign elements (particularly colonial labourers) were largely shaped by the memory of the violent racial tensions which had flared up in France's industrial cities and ports in the latter stages of the Great War. Approximately 300,000 colonial workers (all of them male) had been recruited from North Africa and Indochina during the Great War and drafted into munitions factories throughout metropolitan France. Those who ultimately found work in the ruins of the post-war Somme were both conditioned and in a very real sense battle-hardened by their experiences of life, work and race-relations in wartime France. Rigorously policed under a militarised system of *encadrement* (whereby all colonial workers were housed in barracks on the outskirts of cities and governed under the legal jurisdiction of the court martial) North African and Indochinese workers had borne the brunt of the crisis of morale which gripped France in 1917-18. Bloody racial attacks involving French soldiers and local workers had taken place in Dives-sur-Mer (in Normandie), Versailles, Paris, Toulouse, Rouen, Brest and Dijon. The most serious wartime incident of all had occurred in Le Havre, where a brawl involving a Moroccan worker and a French soldier culminated in a full blown race riot and the deaths of 15 people. At its height, 300 Moroccans were temporarily imprisoned in a local fort in order to safeguard them from French soldiers and civilian workers.[79] Reactions in the Somme towards colonial workers, whose wartime reputation was very much that of the *embusqué* or sexual predator of French women were predictably hostile.[80] This was not merely confined to the extreme left and right wing of the department's press; it was equally apparent in the policies pursued by the prefect in Amiens, the *sous-préfet* in Péronne and the red zone's business community as a whole. Hugh Clout suggests that across the Western Front, the employment of Indo-Chinese labour (be it under the tutelage of the British army or the STPU) aroused the same levels of local antipathy as

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[79] Horne, 'Immigrant workers in France during World War 1', p.86.
[80] Ibid., p.80.

the presence of POW labour.[81] In Pas-de-Calais, the 'scandalous behaviour' of 4,250 Chinese workers was deemed to have instilled fear throughout the department's ruins; women 'would not dare to travel alone' and local communities demanded their removal from the department.[82] So too in the Somme, where numerous complaints concerning Chinese workers were received by Alfred Morain. [83] One of the most vociferous campaigns for their expulsion from the department emanated from Albert's business community. On 13 October 1919, the Péronne based Chamber of Commerce lead by Alfred Nancon (a metal factory owner in Albert) sent the following demand to the ministries of Commerce, of War and the Ministry for the Liberated Regions in October 1919:

> The chamber believes that the Chinese coolies employed by the British army, have created a veritable terror in all of the regions they have occupied, that much of the violence has been attributable to them, some of it committed with weaponry. (The chamber) asks all public authorities in the arrondissement of Péronne to remove them and to repatriate them to Asia. If this cannot be achieved straight away, the chamber asks that a tight form of surveillance be implemented, making it impossible for these people to cause further harm, that they should be completely prohibited from carrying weapons, and they be banned from leaving their camps without serious reason, and without being accompanied by a British officer.[84]

With the 'Péronne revolt' of January 1920, the issue of the Indo-Chinese presence in the Somme reached its crisis-point. Following an accusation of theft made against three Indo-Chinese workers in Péronne, 200 hundred members of their community blocked the police entry in to the town and prevented them from making any arrests.[85] A policy of wholesale repatriation was implemented in the aftermath of this event. By July 1921, an *enquête spéciale* circulated by the prefect to mayors throughout the ruins to provide

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[81] Clout, *After the Ruins*, p.96.
[82] Ibid, pp.97-98.
[83] Ibid, p.96
[84] Lavalard and Embry, *1914-18: La Reconstruction dans la Somme*, p.42.
[85] Clout, *After the Ruins*, p.98.

information on the remaining Indo-Chinese workers, revealed that the entire community had departed.[86] The specific targeting of the Indo-Chinese community is however contentious. *Police correctionelle* reports prior to their expulsion suggest that their role in the acts of theft, violence and sexual crimes which plagued the provisional towns was no greater than that of the Italian, Belgian, Portuguese, Algerian, Moroccan, French or British communities living alongside them; nor was there an obvious decline in the crime rate of the red zone in the aftermath of their departure. Indeed, by 1922, the same concerns over the lawlessness and the sexual menace posed by foreign workers remained: In June 1922 the *sous-préfet* of Péronne complained to the prefect that the number of murders and rapes was increasing 'at a notable rate' in the red zone:

> There is hardly a day when women, young girls and children are not attacked or pursued. Three such crimes were committed in Albert last week. I attribute the situation without fear of being mistaken to the floating population of French and foreign workers, from whom the reconstruction companies are recruiting their labour force, now that the work in the region is beginning to gather pace. This population, which is generally to be treated with some caution, move from one work site to another. Their figure (in the arrondissement of Péronne) is today 7,802...[87]

In response, the General council of the Somme, wrote to the Ministry for the Liberated Regions to complain that the number of foreign workers who had 'penetrated' the department was 'out of all control.'[88]Legitimate though their concerns were, the root causes of lawlessness in the ruins were far more complex than the xenophobic reaction of the chamber of commerce, or indeed the prefecture suggested.

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[86] ADS.99M81139, Indo-Chinois Enquête Spéciale, July 1921.
[87] ADS.KZ332/2, *Sous-préfet* of Péronne to the prefect, June 1922
[88] ADS.KZ1633, Prefect to the Ministry for the Liberated Regions, September 1922.

Firstly, there was the problem of policing the ruins. The wartime system of *encadrement* employed in the interior may have exacerbated racial tension by the rigidity of its militarised structure, but the absence of law enforcement and surveillance in the post-war ruins of the Somme was no alternative. Prior to the Great War, the 26 villages in Albert's canton had all been served with at least 1 local policeman. By the end of 1919, only 9 of them had been able to re-establish a police presence. Post-war absenteeism in Albert's canton thus afflicted over 60% of its villages. The pattern was repeated across the red zone, though at a marginally lower level; approximately 50% of police posts remained unfilled in the arrondissement of Péronne.[89] Causes of the low level of police in the ruins were established in a questionnaire sent to the mayors of the red zone by the prefect in November 1919. In the villages of Bazentin and Fricourt, the death of the pre-war incumbent was cited as the reason for an unfilled post; in Contalmaison and Méaulte, it was due to a lack of provisional housing. Low wages were also cited as a factor. Whilst the cost of living throughout France had risen by an average of approximately 400% between 1914-1919, the salaries offered to village policemen in the post-war Somme barely rose above their pre-war levels. In 1919, the department's *agents de police* were earning an annual wage of 3,000 francs, with an additional *cherté de vie* allocation of 540 francs; a foreign labourer working a ten hour daily shift in the ruins would have been able to accumulate a similar sum of money in less than three months.[90]

Post-war police recruitment was also affected by the clear dangers involved in policing the red zone's foreign communities. In Albert, the council was obliged to issue revolvers for all of the municipal police in the town, 'to defend themselves against the dangerous criminals who seem to stop in Albert more than anywhere in the region and who are involved each

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[89] ADS.KZ1536, Police Municipale.
[90] ADS.KZ1536, Questionnaire aux maires, 18 November 1919.

night in a number of criminal activities.' The growing number of compensation claims made by injured policemen (following the intervention in fights between reconstruction workers), likewise forced the council to take out an extra insurance policy, to cover the town against the financial burden of future awards.[91] Warning the ministry of the interior of the difficulties which existed in policing the Somme in December 1919, the prefect cited the lawlessness of foreign elements in the red zone alongside low levels of police pay as the principal factors behind the recruitment crisis.[92] In fact, these twin concerns had already reached the attention of the ministry. Its budget for the Somme's police force in October 1919 had included a *subvention extraordinaire* of 1,041,666 francs, in order to assure 'order, security and surveillance of foreigners and workers' as well as helping to finance the rebuilding of the police force. Though the ministry failed to provide the prefect with the number of *agents cantonaux* he had deemed necessary for fighting crime in the red zone, 62 extra trainee gendarmes were promised to the department, upon the completion of their courses.[93] Effective surveillance in the red zone depended on more than the manpower and money that the ministry was able to offer however. Roadways across the former battlefields remained in a pitiful condition. Doctors in Albert's canton had refused to travel at night to villages such as Hamel and Bouzincourt because of the craters which continued to block their routes of access.[94] The same problem affected the ability of the police to respond to emergencies. Beyond this, insufficient transport and an almost total lack of telephone communication further reduced their effectiveness. The 'Albert sector' of the Somme consisted of 80 communes, but other than the *chef-lieu* itself, none of the police bureaux possessed a telephone.[95] Little headway was made in providing effective policing for the ruins in the

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[91] AMA. Council minutes, April 1920.
[92] ADS.KZ1536, Prefect to the Ministry of the Interior, December 1919.
[93] ADS.KZ1536, Ministry of the Interior to the prefect, 31 October 1919.
[94] ADS.KZ1093, Prefect's report, March 1921.
[95] ADS.KZ1536, *Sous-prefet* of Péronne to the general secretary of the Somme prefecture, 23

following two years. In his report of March 1921, the prefect recognised that in creating a temporary police force for the Somme, the government had made serious attempts to tackle the problem of insecurity on the red zone, but cast doubt over its results. Methods of police recruitment had failed to take in to account the specific challenges of policing the ruins; 'recruits were for the most part young, ill-prepared; often they were unreliable. Only men who had been already been tested in such conditions, or possessed indispensable experience in another career' would have made suitable candidates.[96]

One obvious consequence of the low standard of policing in the red zone, was the proliferation of weaponry in the provisional towns. Though the acquisition of weaponry from the battlefields was formally banned by the prefect in the summer of 1920, little could be done to prevent it from occurring.[97] Children scavenging in the fields sought out grenades as souvenirs[98]; hundreds of adult labourers were employed in the fields for the specific purpose of collecting weaponry and explosives. In the absence of effective police surveillance, much of the weaponry found its way back to the provisional towns for personal use or trade, rather than to its intended destination in the state arsenal at Laon. Police raids on gun carriers were rare. Despite the concentration of weaponry amongst the communities of foreign and colonial workers in Albert, *Police correctionelle* reports between 1920-22 suggest that the few raids

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December 1919.

[96] ADS.KZ2864, Prefect's report, march 1921.

[97] ADS.241PER2., *La Gazette de Péronne*, 3 October 1920.

[98] Numerous reports of deaths and injuries caused by children playing with weaponry were reported in the Somme press. In March 1922 an 8 year old child in Fricourt was blown up by a grenade whilst playing in the fields after school.. The *Gazette de Péronne* reported that the accident had 'created a great deal of emotion in the village and its neighbouring communes, and not without reason, given the number of explosives which are abandoned on the sides of the roads. ADS.241PER3, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 19 March 1922.

which took place were targeted against local Frenchmen in rural villages.[99] In some cases, the possession of guns may have been informally accepted by local mayors as a legitimate form of defence. One such example is the arming of the red zone's railwaymen who suffered the nightly occurrence of armed attacks and thefts from rolling stock . In early October 1919, one of Albert's *chefs de train* went so far as to inform the mayor of his intention of acquiring a gun, citing the timidity of Albert's police force as the major factor.[100] Insecurity reigned in the red zone sectors of the Amiens-Rouen line. In the same week, *Le Progrès de la Somme* reported that numerous attacks were taking place on the railway lines: at one section, a group of 40 reconstruction workers had forced inspectors to abandon their station, whilst they sought out a railwayman who they believed had denounced one of their number to the police. With some approval, the paper noted that the comrades of the besieged railwayman had fought back. Armed with revolvers and rifles, they had been able to rescue their work mate and force the reconstruction workers to retreat.[101]

Post-war violence cast its shadow over the red zone. In Albert, this was arguably exacerbated by the geography of the ruined town. Albert's provisional housing was largely constructed on the outskirts of town, using land leased for a period of five years by local landowners. In the north-eastern *faubourgs* of the town, the largest provisional township, known as *Le Village,* housed 450 employees of local industrialists in 12 parallel streets (named Rues A, B,C etc.); the second largest was *Péronne-District* which consisted of nissens and huts largely reserved for workers employed by the District and SRRL. Two *Cités des Cheminots* were established

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[99] This conclusion is based upon the crime reports in the *Gazette de Péronne* between August 1920 and December 1922.

[100] ADS.5Z57, Albert, affaires communales, letter from a *chef de train* to the mayor of Albert, 2 October 1919.

[101] ADS.5Z57 Albert, affaires communales. The newspaper report appeared on 1 October 1919.

on the western outskirts of the town for the railwaymen employed by the *Compagnie du Nord* and the *Chemin de fer Economique*. To the south of the town, *La Guinguette* was the smallest of the provisional quarters and was inhabited by local farmers. Situated to the north of Albert, on the Bapaume road was *Camp Anglais*.This was the settlement of the gardeners, builders and grave diggers employed by the Imperial War Graves Commission to create permanent cemeteries for the fifty thousand Births dead in the canton.[102]With the exception of *Camp Anglais*, all of the provisional townships on the outskirts of Albert were occupied more or less exclusively by French workers. Despite the large numbers of foreign workers who arrived in the town between 1919-24, no provisional township was ever constructed to house them. Instead, they sought lodgings in the bars, restaurants and hotels located in the centre of the ruins, or in large barrack-style huts erected on Albert's many building sites. There, they coexisted with many other locals who had either erected provisional huts on the site of their former homes, or inhabited dwellings constructed out of rubble and timber. For the Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian (and, prior to their expulsion) Indo-Chinese workers who had been accustomed to a life on the outskirts of towns and cities under conditions of strict wartime surveillance, this reversed the dynamics of marginality. By inhabiting the ruined streets in the centre of Albert, they (and fellow immigrant workers) also occupied and controlled the principal area of socialisation in the post-war town, for despite the significant shift of Albert's population towards the provisional quarters on the faubourgs, few of the town's post-war bar owners, shopkeepers and restaurateurs had actually followed them. The vast majority of Albert's bars remained in close proximity to their pre-war location, in the derelict streets surrounding the shell of Notre-Dame-de-Brébières.[103]In order to drink in bars,

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[102] ADS.6M16/1, Albert, census returns 1921. As no maps were produced of the provisional town, information on its layout has been derived from the 1921 census returns.
[103] ADS.6M16/1, Albert, census returns 1921. In 1911 the largest number of bars in the town were located on the Rue Bapaume in the centre of Albert. This remained the case in 1921.

railwaymen from the twin *Cités des Cheminots* (two neighbourhoods which were entirely bereft of bars and restaurants) and industrial workers in *Le Village* (which despite its size had only 1 bar), thus journeyed each night from the margins of Albert, in to the areas of the town most densely populated by foreigners.

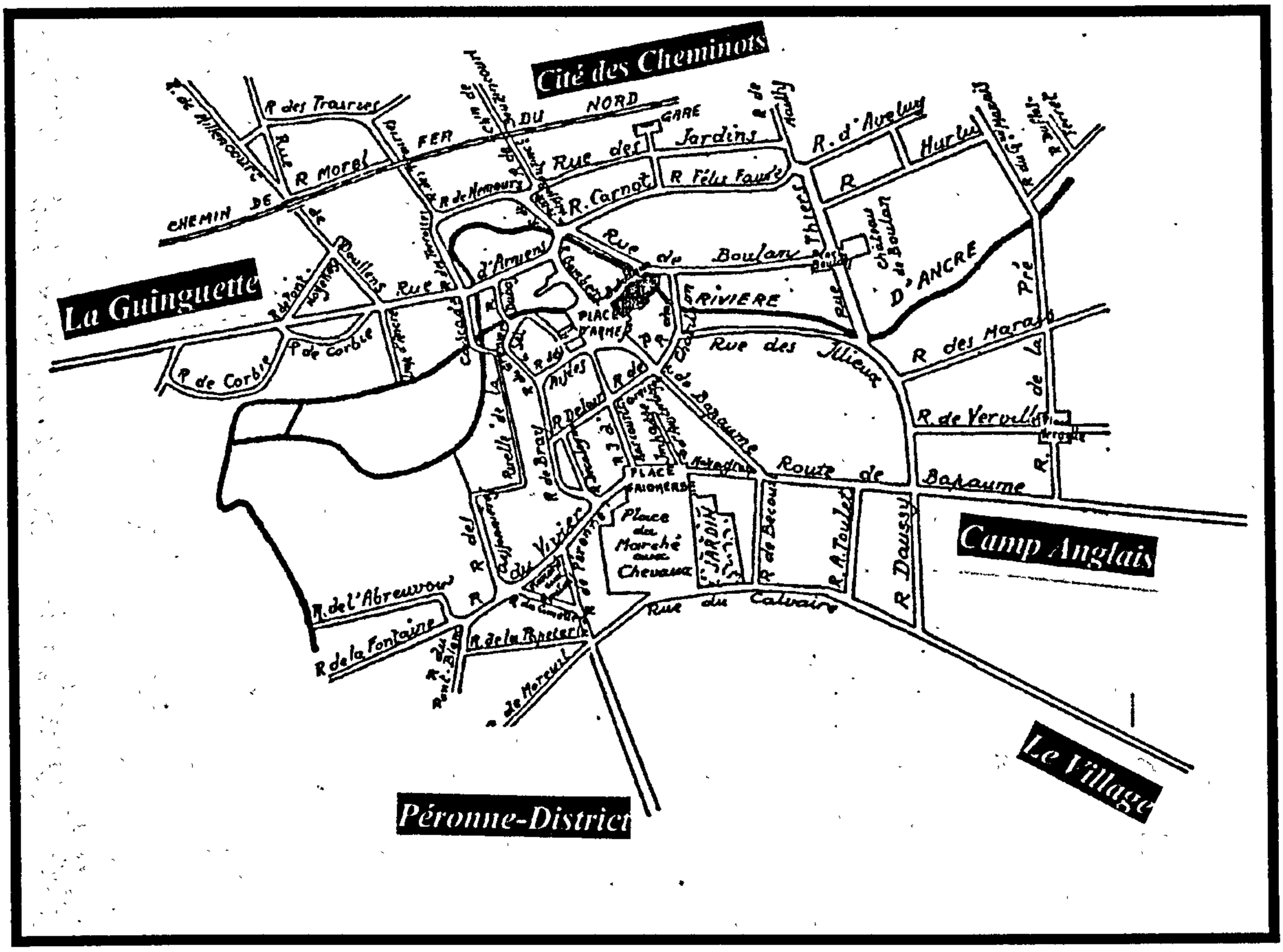

Figure 17: Map of the principal provisional settlements in Albert (adapted from Frédérick Lemaire, *Albert jadis et aujourd'hui,* p.X).

It was in the bars of Albert and the villages of its canton that much of the violence took place. The first serious incident to be reported in the *Gazette de Péronne*, took place in August 1920 and involved Amélie Pot, a pre-war owner of a bar on the rue d'Amiens who had returned to Albert's ruins to re-establish her business. She was robbed of jewellery and bar takings totalling 1,450 francs on 8 August 1920. Five weeks later, another attempted robbery took

place in her bar, during which she was bludgeoned to death. Twelve hours later, on the outskirts of Bazentin, a farmer was murdered in similar fashion and for the same reason. The *Gazette de Péronne* commented that the criminals had not been discovered despite enquiries by the police and concluded that 'it was probable that they would be found amongst the population of *exotiques*, who for the past year have been circulating in our unhappy region.'[104]Five other deaths were recorded as *morts violents* in Albert in 1920, accounting for approximately 10% of the total number of the town's deceased.[105] Many of the more violent crimes took place in bars at closing time, when drunken workers were refused drinks. Bar owners and their remaining clientele formed the most likely targets for drunken assaults. In the same week as the initial robbery of Amélie Pot, two other attacks were recorded in the *Gazette de Péronne.* In Aveluy, two *désoubusage* workers who had been refused access to a local bar, became involved in a fight with 6 English soldiers; one of the soldiers was hospitalised with a fractured skull. In Puzeaux, a man who had likewise been shut out of a bar on account of his drunkenness, responded by shooting a fellow reconstruction worker.[106]One week later, the same scenario was repeated in Chaulnes, when a drunken worker from Finistère stabbed a gendarme following a bar owner's refusal to serve him. In Combles, the owner of the cafè Cabuzel was threatened with a grenade by a drunken worker, when his demand for a drink was turned down.[107] In Moislans, a labourer shot a fellow worker for refusing to light his pipe; 'some people pull out their revolvers more often than others pull out their handkerchiefs' reflected the *Gazette de Péronne* in the same week.[108] In Ham, the familiar pattern of violent attacks in bars continued. The response of a drunken

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[104] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 8 August and 5 September 1920.
[105] ADS.99M81450, Bulletin sanitaire, 1920.
[106] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 8 August 1920.
[107] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 15 August 1920.
[108] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 15 August 1920.

Moroccan to a bar owner's refusal to serve him a drink was reported by the *Gazette* in the following article:

> without saying a word, the *exotique* began pacing up and down the bar, then suddenly he grabbed a litre glass of beer and tried to swallow its contents. The owner protested and tried to take it back, but the furious African took out a knife, which he plunged in to the stomach of his adversary. Gravely injured, the man was able to make a statement to the inspectors of the *police spéciale*, but died shortly afterwards. The man behind this savage murder was placed under arrest and taken to Péronne...when will the assassin be guillotined?[109]

With the exception of the Ham murder (in July 1921), the other crimes mentioned here took place in 5 week period in August and September 1920. The 6 communes in which the crimes took place were located in 3 different cantons, between 2 km and 22 km from Albert. Despite the frequency of serious crimes related to drunkenness in Albert's own canton, the number of people actually arrested and charged with public drunkenness was extremely low. In 1921, The council expressed its displeasure at the number of establishments which remained open throughout the night 'encouraging and developing debauchery and keeping workers away from their work sites.'[110] And yet in the 24 months between January 1920 and December 1921 just over 100 arrests were made across the 26 villages of the canton, and brought before the magistrate in Albert. With the exception of a solitary Belgian worker who appeared before the magistrate in February 1920, all of the arrests made by local police for drunkenness in that particular year involved French people. Evidence thus indicates that the local police targeted locals, but fought shy of confronting drunken foreign workers, conscious as they no doubt were of the dangers such an arrest might entail.[111]

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[109] ADS.241PER2 *La Gazette de Péronne*, 31 July 1920.
[110] AMA. Council Minutes, December 1921.
[111] ADS.4U5_38, Magistrate records, 1919-20.

Other crimes in the red zone revealed a greater measure of calculation. Bar owners formed inviting targets for gangs of thieves. Amélie Pot's murder in Albert was an extreme, though far from unique example of violent armed robbery in the ruins. More typical perhaps was the initial robbery of her bar which had involved a gang operating on the local railway line between Amiens and Albert; likewise in the commune of Lihons, when a group of Belgian workers appeared to leave at closing time, only to reappear at the back of the bar some minutes later, in order to force their way in. The owner was forced to the ground whilst her takings (and household possessions) were pillaged. The gang then left for the village of Chassagnaux where they repeated a similar act of theft, taking items worth 1,200 francs.[112] In Cléry a bar owner was robbed of 1,900 francs in the same week. Like Amélie Pot in Albert, she had attempted to hide her wealth under the bed in her nissen hut, but discovered that this form of provisional housing offered little protection against burglary. Due to their fragile nature, nissens and provisional huts (their 'windows' were invariably made out of oiled paper, due to the post-war glass shortage[113]) formed constant targets for robberies throughout the reconstruction period; so too did the heavy material depots of the O.R.I (*Office de la Reconstitution Industrielle*) and equipment stores at *Camp Anglais*. Given the high prices placed on building materials by government agencies such as the SRRL, a black market in stolen goods inevitably flourished amongst some of the less scrupulous companies involved in reconstruction and local communities who had been partly dependent on trench scavenging. Thus, in September, October and November 1920, robberies took place at the ORI depots in Moislans and Péronne, as well as the PTT depot in Nésle; 5 men from Brittany who had arrived in Albert in November intent on a similar crime, were also arrested by the Gendarmerie. Sporadic robberies of the war dead also took place, as indeed they had in

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[112] ADS.241PER3, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 12 February 1922.
[113] ADS.KZ1540, *Batiment et Travaux Publics*, 5 December 1920. .

1914-18. As late as 1926, the ministry of the interior was obliged to warn prefects across the devastated regions to tighten surveillance over grave diggers. This followed the clandestine opening of a *fosse communale* in Aisne, in which wallets had been stolen from 14 bodies. Their bones had been replaced *pelle-melle* in the corner of a pit, rendering their identification impossible.[114]

Despite the collective sense of insecurity which in many ways defined life in the early post-war ruins, it is clear that the red zone represented an attractive commercial proposition for traders, shopkeepers and bar owners. In the aftermath of the Great War, the Ministry for the Liberated Regions dubbed the Somme and its neighbouring war torn departments a 'new klondike'[115] This notion of commercial opportunism determining the size and social profile of the Somme's provisional towns is reinforced when we look more closely at the businesses which were established in Albert by 1921. Reflecting the social patterns of a community with a large presence of single, male reconstruction labour force, 52 bars had been established in the town. This figure represented a higher number per head of population than had existed in 1914. Their high concentration in Albert flatly contravened the prefect's attempts to combat alcoholism in the red zone, by limiting the number of authorisations granted to incoming bar owners.[116] Some bars would be unauthorised, occupying the ruins of the town centre and in so doing, ignoring a pre-war *zone de protection* aimed at upholding collective morality in public spaces by prohibiting bars from around all public buildings.[117] Significant too, are the types of people who owned the bars in the provisional town: 119 bar owners appear on the 1914 edition of the town's trade directory yet only 23 returned to re-establish their

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[114] ADS.KZ1024, Circular from the Ministry of the Interior to all prefects, 8 April 1926.
[115] Hugh Clout, *After the Ruins*, p.151.
[116] ADS.99M97023/5, Bulletin de l'Inspection Départemental d'Hygiene 1910-28.
[117] ADS.5Z 75, Albert , affaires communales, *sous-préfet* to the prefect, 6 May 1921.

businesses, over half of the towns bars being run occupied by in-comers.[118] Across the entire business community of 1914 a similar pattern of high absenteeism would emerge by 1921: 37 *épiceries* had existed in 1914, their number in the provisional town being cut to five; four of these establishments were owned in 1921 by outsiders. Seven *boulangers* had lived in Albert prior to the Great War yet only one returned in its aftermath; likewise for the twelve *charcutiers* of 1914, the 7 *coiffeurs* and the 17 *couturiers* of the pre-war era.[119] So great was the foreign involvement in the economy of the provisional town that the few pre-war traders who had resettled in the ruins protested to the mayor against 'the competition created by foreign traders who are setting themselves up in ever increasing numbers in Albert.'[120]

One notable exception to this picture of absence in the post-war town is Albert's agricultural community. Amongst the 26 families who had farmed land in the canton prior to the outbreak of the Great War, a far higher figure (of around fifty percent) returned to settle in the provisional town by 1921. Nevertheless one third of the commune's land owners in 1921 were new to Albert, indicating an increase of land sale throughout 1914-18, despite the devastation it had suffered and the difficulties of farming it in the aftermath of the war. In many cases, the rebirth of the Somme's earth was not the principal aim of red zone land purchase. For several years after the armistice, fields around Albert would continue to be offloaded by local peasants to scrap metal merchants whose interest in the earth lay solely in the very detritus which had rendered it sterile.[121] So common were transactions involving the

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[118] ADS.191REV1,Annuaire générale 1914.
[119] In Péronne, similar fears of being overrun by post-war profiteers were expressed in the *Gazette de Péronne*, 3 October 1920.
[120] AMA. Council minutes April 1920.
[121] ADS.KZ1024 . Jules Prodier a scrap metal merchant had bought land in 1927 in Beaumont-Hamel for 800 francs from a local land owner, Monsieur Jolly. A legal battle ensued between Prodier and the state over who possessed the rights to the metal which lay within it.

illicit disappearance of shells from the department that the prefect voiced his anger at what he considered to be acts of 'embezzlement' from the assets of the department.[122] Communes which lay in the cantons of Albert and Combles, described as being 'excessively rich' in copper deposits due to the intensity of the artillery bombardments they had suffered, were considered to have attracted undesirable occupants in search of speedy enrichment. Some (mainly foreigners according to the prefect) would gather metal from the fields, sell it on to local metal dealers who in turn would smuggle the metal out of the Somme to the departments of Aisne, Nord and Pas-de-Calais where the percentage demanded by the prefecture on recovered metal was considerably lower. Even *désobusage* companies which had purchased the right to harvest metal from the fields were not above suspicion. Their teams would remain under sporadic police surveillance lest they drilled in to any unfired shells, and by emptying them of their TNT, claim them as legitimate items of recovered metal (all unfired shells were exclusively the property of the state arsenals). Similarly suspected for their role in illegal metal dealing were the local *forgerons*, indeed so determined was the prefect to break their individual chains of supply that he demanded all railway companies in the region to employ extra inspectors on their trains. Any suspiciously large items of baggage were henceforth to be checked.[123] From such examples we may conclude that the description of the Somme as a 'new klondike' presented itself in a literal form to its post-war observers. The very metal which had symbolised the painful alienation of the peasant from the traditions of his earth, had itself in the aftermath of the war, become prized as a means of self enrichment.

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[122] ADS.KZ1024, Prefect to the procureur général de la République, 4 April 1925.
[123] ADS.KZ1024, Prefect to the director of the *Compagnie du Nord*, 9 March 1925.

Presence and Absence across the Canton

For many pre-war inhabitants of the Somme, it is evident that the red zone appeared as an inhospitable and deeply uninviting environment. Far from embracing the patriotic overtone of return and resettlement, many strove either to delay their return, or to avoid the hardships of life in the ruins altogether. Despite the high rate of disease in Albert, only 1 doctor returned to live in the ruins between 1918-21[124]. Amongst professionals, this pattern of semi-exile was familiar. Victor Bombart, whose home had been pillaged by British troops whilst he was in the army, featured prominently in the post-war town, both as *notaire* and as a member of cantonal commission of war damage evaluation. He too continued to live in Amiens. In total, approximately 50% of the town's pre-war population would remain in exile until the definitive reconstruction of their homes took place in the mid 1920s. For those whose principal pre-war incomes had been derived from property, this was only possible through the sale of the rights to future war damages on some of the houses they had once possessed. Thus, Jock Fletcher (a Scottish hotelier), was able to establish the *Hotel de la Paix* (an early outpost for battlefield tourists) by purchasing the ruins of a house on the rue de Péronne from Mme Vve Soufflet for 6,000 francs in July 1919. The total compensation he was ultimately able to derive totalled over 90,000 francs.[125] Mme Soufflet remained in Paris until her second property (also on the rue de Péronne) was completed in the mid 1920s. Her family also raised money to fund their post-war absence by leasing the land on which the provisional houses of *Le Village* were constructed.[126] Sales of this nature had taken place from the beginning of the war, but were particularly frequent in the summer of 1917, when the 'genial' German withdrawal from the arrondissement of Péronne appeared to be

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[124] ADS.5Z75, Albert, affaires communales, *sous-prefet* to the mayor of Albert, July 1919.
[125] ADS.10R27, Dommages de Guerre.
[126] AMA. Council minutes, 11 January 1921.

definitive, generating as it did, faith in the possibility of an imminent reconstruction. The *Societé Anonyme Guillaume-Sergot* featured prominently in this short-lived period of war damage speculation. It purchased war damage claims covering seven different properties in Albert between August and September 1917 for a price of 97,000 francs. The amount of compensation it was able to derive from the acquired ruins totalled 160,000 francs.[127] Premature *sales* of war damage claims occasionally proved costly. Mme Vve. Lassal was one who sold all rights to her destroyed home in 1917 to *Guillaume-Sergot*, but was forced to return to the ruins after the war. Inhabiting one of the huts in *Le Village* which was reserved by the council for the town's poor, she paid a 1 franc tariff per year as rent.[128] Soaring wartime and post-war inflation is the most likely explanation of her poverty. But the potential returns from the purchase of war damage claims were invariably spectacular, ensuring that the practise would become integral to the financing of reconstruction in the red zone. When the town of Albert received a million francs from the *Crédit Foncier* in 1931 (as part of a major loan it had negotiated in the early 1920s), almost 50% of the capital would be employed in the purchase of war damage claims from private citizens or other municipal authorities in the department. Through this policy, a 480,000 franc outlay would quickly procure a 25% profit.[129]

Though wealth, age and social status all had a significant bearing on the decision of whether to return to the rubble of a former home, absence was not unique to the town's wealthy bourgeoisie. The absence of pre-war civil servants and in some communes, of mayors themselves would be similarly striking, carrying with it a paralysing effect on the ruined villages. At the Mayors' Congress of July 1919, 22 out of 26 mayors from the canton of

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[127] ADS.10R27 Dommages de Guerre.
[128] ADS.10R27, Dommages de Guerre.
[129] AMA. Council minutes, June 1931

Albert (some of whom would form the *Fédération Paysanne d'Albert)* remained in the interior of France. Whilst in many cases this was simply due to the lack of a suitable barrack in which to recommence their official duties, the absence of mayors from Thiepval and Fricourt would stretch for some years beyond this date. In Thiepval and the adjoining hamlet of St. Pierre Divion, the problem was particularly acute. Paul Cathelain,(the incumbent mayor until 1925), was a pre-war landowner who chose to reside permanently in the department of Seine Inferieure at the end of the war. His own absence from Thiepval had a significant effect on patterns of post-war resettlement. Determined to gain a quick resolution to the state offer of purchase on Thiepval's 721 hectares of land, Cathelain was accused of actively discouraging fellow villagers from returning to Thiepval, in order to prompt landowners to likewise cede their land to the state. Cathelain was not the sole absentee; no other members of Thiepval's council were prepared to return and live in the commune either, obliging the *sous-préfet* to consult neighbouring mayors for advice on whether a suitable replacement could be found to complete the register of births and deaths.[130] The resulting response (from the mayor of Mesnil-Martinsart) was negative. Municipal administration in Thiepval continued to suffer from high (almost total) absenteeism throughout the 1920s. By the end of the decade the commune still lacked a single councillor who had returned to live in there. One of their number in 1929, was an inhabitant of Villers Bretonneux with no familial, land or property links with the commune; another councillor was a permanent resident in Paris.[131] For the men employed in rebuilding the red zone, absenteeism among local mayors increased the risks inherent in their work. Due to an ineffective *désobusage* in the initial months of peace, crippling injuries would remain a common aspect of reconstruction throughout the 1920s. Potentially, victims of munition

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[130] ADS.5Z75, Thiepval, Affaires Communales.

[131] ADS.5Z70, Affaires Communales de Thiepval. High absenteeism also dogged the local administration of the neighbouring village of Beaucourt-sur-Ancre.

explosions could be left uncompensated if their claims were not dealt with effectively in the local commune. Consequently, one company employed in the rebuilding of Fricourt complained that whilst it was legally bound by its insurance company to report any accidents within forty eight hours of such an occurrence, this was proving impossible where the mayor required to provide a signature to their damage claim remained an exile in Seine-Inférieur.[132] Despite his own lack of credentials as a wartime *indéracinable*, Abel Pifre drew attention to a familiar moral distinction between presence and absence in a war torn zone, when he reflected to his council that some civil servants 'were prepared to face the many hardships involved in reintegration in the devastated regions. Others had chosen to profit from the comforts offered in the undamaged towns, not caring about the problems or expenses they had caused to those who needed their help.'[133]

To such examples of reluctance to live amongst the post-war ruins of the Somme, others may be added. Individual population figures can be examined for the communes which made up Albert's red zone, just as David de Sousa has for the Somme in its entirety. The discrepancy between the two sets of figures, and indeed the conclusions drawn from them are striking. Whilst the numbers of refugees who returned to the department as a whole in 1921 (121,000 out of 183,000 had resettled in the Somme) suggest in de Sousa's words a 'a wave of returnees', neither this figure, nor the historian's consequent claim that 'those who had lost the most were those who returned' appears as persuasive when contrasted with the red zone of the Somme in isolation.[134] In Albert the population was around 30% of its pre-war size; in Authuille the figure was 25% . In Thiepval and St. Pierre Divion the scale of post-war

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[132] ADS.5Z75, Thiepval, Affaires Communales. *Enterprise Contenson* to the director of the services techniques de reconstruction, 23 April 1921
[133] AMA. Council minutes, April 1920
[134] De Sousa, *La reconstruction et sa mémoire* p.52.

absence was astonishing. A pre-war population of 166 had shrunk by 1921 to 16. Fourteen of this number came from a single family of carpenters employed by the state for the erection of provisional homes. They inhabited wooden huts strung along the banks of the Ancre at St. Pierre Divion.So too did Oscar Bellet, Thiepval's sole returning farmer. Only one person (Marie-Louise Duthart) had resettled on the ridge of the Ancre valley at Thiepval itself. Depicted in picture postcards as a symbol of the redoubtable qualities of the Picard peasant, the 'heroine of the ruins' would remain the commune's sole inhabitant until the mid-1920s. The restoration of both the commune and its surrounding farmland (and with it the mass influx of Polish workers) would not begin on a meaningful scale until the following decade.

Commune	Population in July 1914	Population in April 1921
Auchonvillers	244	98
Authuille	243	73
Aveluy	444	191
Bazentin	215	116
Contalmaison	161	68
La Boiselle	176	62
Thiepval	166	16

Table 5: The effects of exile and devastation on the populations of 7 red zone communes in 1921 (ADS.2MI_LN).

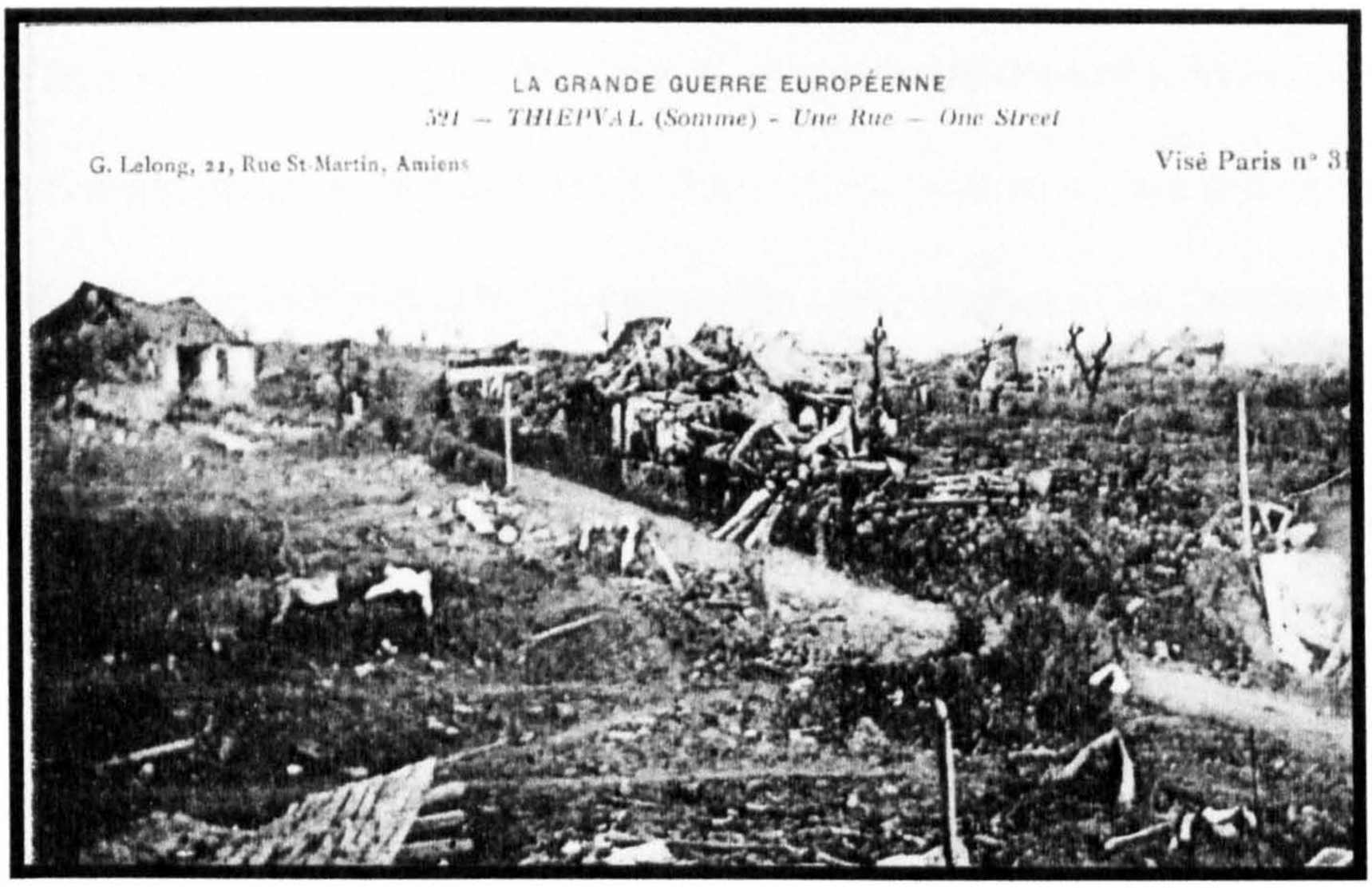

Figure 18: The ruins of Thiepval. Little reconstruction took place until the end of the 1920s. (ADS.8FI5191).

However poignantly the example of Marie-Louise Duthart may have been used by contemporaries to portray a romanticised vision of the western front, the wholesale absence of her fellow villagers, and the policy of *discouraging* return and reconstruction pursued by the mayor, Paul Cathelain, reveals the stark social realities behind the facade of *l'amour du sol natal*. Why then did such myths persist? Did they merely represent the favoured optic through which the undamaged regions of France chose to view the Western Front? Or does employment of the same myth by both Left and Right in the red zone hint at a more complex functionality?

According to *La Gazette de Péronne*, poetic visions of resettlement in the ruins amounted to little more than a luxury afforded to those whose lives were far removed from its daily horrors. Thus, when a deputy from the department of Nord described its red zone communities as 'inviolable amidst the majesty of their desert,' he was unsurprisingly

dismissed as a fantasist whose view of the ruins came from the confines of a distant chateau.[135] The argument was not implausible. How much easier must it have been for France's interior newspapers such as *La Républican Orléanais* to sustain romanticised images of a frontier-land inhabited by pioneers. The same applies to the poetical images of shattered churches, written in the Abbeville paper, *La Somme.* Though it was an important billet for soldiers in the Somme's military zone, Abbeville was by no stretch of the imagination a true front-line town; geographically distant from the theatre of war throughout the conflict, its notion of post-war ruins was also imagined rather than real. And did Maurice Barrès or Gaston Deschamps, the post-war wanderers and romanticists of the red zone ever experience a winter under a tar-coated *logement de fortune*? It seems unlikely. But if *La Gazette de Péronne* was quick to castigate political opponents who relied upon patriotic phrases to confront the post-war wasteland, it was equally susceptible to acting likewise whenever the occasion required it. Thus, on the 14 November 1920, three days after patriotic ceremonies of remembrance had taken place across the Somme to mark the second anniversary of the armistice, the newspaper expounded its beliefs on the qualities of the regional earth and the traits of the peasant who lived upon it:

> The earth...which will perish only with the world itself, has always supplied mankind with its greatest wealth, the largest number and the most enduring of its warriors. Revolutions may overturn nations, industries may grow and transform or whither away, different types of government may succeed one another, but one thing is immutable: the earth. It is anchored in the hearts of men like a religion. The sweat of one's brow and the effort and the daily worries and the wonderful joy at the time of a plentiful harvest create a wholeness which attaches (a man to the earth) forever, and whose links can only be broken in death. We witnessed during the war, these valiant and tenacious people in their regiments, whose glory will be forever remembered. The peasant made the army indestructible, its mentality strengthened by contact with the living tombs of the trenches. Even at the line of fire, the labouring peasant took up his plough; whenever his brigade was away from the front, he helped out local farmers on their land...In factories, workers can go on strike,

[135] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne,* 21 March 1921.

demand days off, recuperation after sickness, even holidays. Their work is neither attractive nor personal. The earth attaches men automatically. Man leans towards it and he helps to build it...This is why, following in the footsteps of the Gauls, the Frenchmen of past centuries have created a patrie which is essentially agricultural. In a land such as ours, where a temperate climate favours the work of the harvest, in a land where work is a task, but not a burden, there could only be born a race of peasants. We were in 1914, the only nation where agriculture remained the most important national industry. We sold butter, sugar, wine, fruit, flowers, vegetable, livestock to the world...But the war has laid to rest in their tombs over a million peasant labourers. It has mutilated 500,000 men, who despite the progress of surgery, have been forced to abandon the earth for the city. On 11 November 1918, it seemed that the enemy had ravaged our soil (and) destroyed our villages... But today the devastated regions are returning to life. Standing in their ruins they (the peasants) contemplate the ravaged land and conserve the image to pass on to their sons. They leave their complaints behind and labour with a fruitful ardour. Their sadness bears fruit. They rebuild, one by one, their homes. From the cradle to the grave, the place where a man was born can never be abandoned.[136]

Similarly content to evoke images of *La France éternelle* which owed more to Barrès than the rhetoric of the SFIO was *La Voix des Ruines*. Though its own reaction to the commemorations of war on 1 November 1920 had been to remind readers of the bleak landscape in which they lived -one barely unchanged from 11 November 1918- the ancient qualities of the shattered earth could on occasions transcend the misery of the post-war ruins and inspire a poetic response:

Lift up your bruised and battered head, your adorable face
With its ray of martyrdom and its valiant exploits,
Worthy of our proud forefathers, the *Picards* of times past,
Who have guilded your coats of arms with an incomparable glow.[137]

If the carefully chosen imagery of the red zone press appeared suggestive of common ideological ground with Barrès, its function had been radically reshaped. References to patriotic peasants returning to their ruins served only to highlight moral differences between the war zone and the interior. Mirroring the ways in which rootless refugees had formed the

[136] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne,* 14 November 1920.
[137] ADS.265PER1, *La Voix des Ruines,* 16 October 1920.

countertype to the ideal patriot in 1914-18, the red zone newspapers sought to construct a vision of post-war France around the same dichotomy. Here though, the roles of patriot and anti-patriot were reversed: contemptuously referring to the undamaged interior as *La France épargnée* (just as the occupied towns of the 10 Western Front departments had been labelled *les pays Boches*), its inhabitants were cast in a collective role as profiteers and *embusqués*:

> *La France épargnée*, frantically dancing on the edge of a volcano of social ills, ills borne of the great torment (of war), exaggerating the greed of people who see in the recovery of our region only further opportunities for more corrupt deals.[138]

La Gazette de Péronne was no less committed to the construction of red zone identity via reference to wartime division. It consciously imitated the models of mockery and invective which had been employed in trench journals. Images of *embusqués* fleeing imaginary dangers in their towns for the pleasure and safety of the seaside had been used by *poilus* in trench journals such as the *sans-tabac* to highlight their own qualities of courage and patriotic endeavour.[139] In the red zone press, the trench journal tradition continued. Civilians who had replaced the *poilus* in the ruins of the Western Front were portrayed with much of the soldiers' moral and patriotic authority. As ever, the *embusqués* were the weak, rootless and decadent civilians who inhabited the towns and cities beyond the Western Front, and paid little notice to the bitter fight taking place beyond the sanitised confines of their own world:

> As the season reaches its height at Deauville, at Trouville and in other places where the happy people whose regions were spared by the war can dance the fox-trot, we,

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[138] ADS.265PER1, *La Voix des Ruines*, 8 January 1921

[139] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War*, (Oxford, 1992), p.111.

> the disaster victims of the red zone, fight against the realities of a hopeless situation.[140]

Deserted by the complacent and uncaring interior, their struggle in the ruins of the Western Front was ultimately one of life or death:

> In the red zone, there are numerous people who regret the trust they placed in the flowery words of the government and chose to resettle. Refugee, evacuee, repatriate, perhaps all of this was better than being reintegrated. For us, it is worse than the war itself. Everyday it is a struggle to avoid a miserable death.[141]

If this seemed far removed from Barrèsian visions of France as a 'spiritual totality', the invective pouring forth from the red zone did not wholly negate a sense of catharsis.[142] Parallels between the comradeship of *poilus* and returning peasants were employed to a specific end, underscoring a desire to mobilise the red zone as a single political voice. That this entailed an obsessional focus upon the 'otherness' of *la France épargnée*, reflected the marginality of the early returnees to the ruins and the radical influence this had upon the politics of the post-war era. The harsh nature of the contrast between the social and physical debris of the battlefields and the ideals of *la France éternelle* would be apparent in most aspects of the reconstruction process between 1918-32. None more so than in the most critical of all collective responses to the Great War: remembrance.

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[140] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 14 August 1921.
[141] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 25 December 1920.
[142] See David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism and the Ideology of Culture*, (New Jersey, 1995), p.21.

Figure 19: *All Saints Day in the ruins* (ADS.265PER1, *La Voix des Ruines*, 1 November 1920).

CHAPTER FOUR

'WE ARE THE WAR'S TRUE VANQUISHED': REMEMBRANCE IN THE RUINS, 1918-1921.

At 12.30 p.m. on the eleventh of November 1918, precisely one and a half hours after a definitive silence had fallen across the Western Front, prefects across metropolitan France received a telegram from the interior cabinet in Paris. Marked with the words *extrême urgence,* the telegram reminded each recipient to ensure that a coherent form of public celebration took place without delay in his own particular department. No town, village or hamlet across the interior was to be excluded from a uniform response to the proclamation of armistice. All churches were to announce the dawn of the new era by ringing their bells *à toutes volées;* public spaces surrounding patriotic monuments and town halls were to be clothed in the colours of the victorious allied nations; agreements were to be reached with any incumbent military authority to ensure the employment of their heavy artillery in providing an element of military pomp to the occasion, through the firing of salvoes *tirées au maximum* across each department.[1] In carrying out the orders from Paris, prefects across France would enable the initial hours of the post-war era to pass amidst a cacophony of noise, colour, patriotic demonstration and collective religious observance. As well as marking the end of a conflict which for four years had defied all notion of finality, Armistice day in 1918 signified a primary stage in the construction of post-war memory, an event

[1] ADS.KZ252, Interior cabinet to all prefects, 11 November 1918.

which would be experienced collectively throughout France in spatial milieux heavy with patriotic symbolism. It was in the mass gatherings which took place in front of France's churches, town halls, public squares and outdated war memorials that the process of divorce from the trauma of 1914-18 could begin.

Armistice across the Western Front would also signal a significant shift in the attitudes of France's interior civilians towards the northern departments. A landscape which for four years had fallen either within the heavily policed parameters of the allied military zone or *les pays-Boches* was once more accessible to the eyes of the nation as a whole. With this territorial liberation, there would follow an indisputable desire for a stake in the moral ownership of the land upon which the Great War had been won. Battlefields which were once the unique domain of the soldiers would effectively become national property. Trenches and craters, saps and dug outs- the physical realm of the wartime soldier- would present themselves to post-war visitors as poignant features of the nation's 'moral boulevard' or as significant sites of memory along its *via sacra:* through the employment of such phraseology, a navigable route through the memory of the conflict could perhaps be forged. Amongst the earliest visitors to the desert-scape of the Somme was the President of the U.S.A. Woodrow Wilson, and the Kings of Italy, Britain and Belgium. All boarded trains which took them across the department in the last weeks of 1918. From a hastily wired telegram on 6 December, we learn that the royal train carrying the last of the pilgrim-monarchs was nine minutes late on its arrival at the military zone town of Abbeville.[2] The detail is of course incidental, but it draws attention to the more intriguing issue of precisely what aspects of the post-war Somme could -or could not- be viewed from a railway carriage window. From such perspectives we may explore the ways in which the department's many visitors would

[2] ADS.KZ252, *Compagnie du Nord* to the Ministry of the Interior, 6 December 1918.

choose to remember the Great War and how these differed from the communities which settled in its wooden townships.

The point needs to be illustrated: we may ask whether the packed itinerary of the Belgian king allowed either himself or his entourage anything more than a superficial glance at the most symbolic edifices of the Somme's ruins. And what of the routes taken by tourists in their packed *trains de pèlerinage*? Were they also directed towards scenes which served to reinforce literary visions of the ruined front-line as the apotheosis of *la France éternelle*? Or were there other ways of viewing the ruins, which drew less upon patriotic obligations towards solemnity and inclined more towards cheap voyeurism, a last vestige perhaps, of old wartime social divisions? Drawing attention to the vulgar forms of advertisement pursued in 1918 by the British company, Pickfords ('Remember, as soon as the fine weather arrives, hundreds of workers will undertake the clearing of the battlefields from the ravages of war...Make an immediate reservation if you want to see something of chaos and debris left by the war.') Modris Eksteins has suggested that the 'spectacle of a civilisation in ruins inspires an interesting mix of pity, titillation, rumination and excitement.'[3] *La Gazette de Péronne* viewed the many thousands of summer tourists who thronged the streets of the Somme's provisional towns in a similar vein. Whilst it welcomed the presence of widows and bereaved families in search of missing sons to the Somme, the flood of *excursionistes* provoked a sense of anger, one which was exacerbated by the preferential treatment they received from the railway companies:

> The battlefields of the Somme are a means of money making for the *Compagnie du Nord.* For the victims (of the devastation) it can do nothing. For those who are not, it finds coal, personnel and rolling-stock. Has it not organised the pilgrimage trains we

[3] Modris Eksteins "Michelin, Pickfords et la Grande Guerre: le tourisme sur le front occidental: 1919-1991" in J.J. Becker, Jay.M.Winter, Gerd Krumeich, Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau (eds.), *Guerre et cultures 1914-18* (Paris, 1994), p. 420.

> have seen circulating for the past two years? They walk through our streets, these visitors...spending five minutes to see how we live in the ruins, looking at us like freaks which are displayed at fairs...[4]

Likewise *Le Réveil de Picardie*, which fell back upon a familiar castigation of *la France épargnée* when it observed 'crowds of people who, under the pretext of expressing their condolences, come with the sole aim of feasting their eyes on the scene of disaster, recording with satisfaction that their enemy, their nightmare was no longer there, and crushing his corpse underfoot.Their words of commiseration ring false.'[5] Though predictably hostile in tone, their concerns with the motivational forces driving post-war tourism reveal the complexities of remembrance in the red zone. We must therefore turn our attention towards the reintegrated communities themselves: what specific aspects of their social and physical environment would prevent them from espousing the commemorative culture which guided collective memories of war in communities beyond their ruined territory? Did the social and political pressures towards acts of post-war remembrance and memorialisation engender faith in the *union sacrée*, or did they reinforce collective feelings of exclusion and marginality? On 25 June 1919, the conclusion to the Versailles conference triggered a second telegram from the interior cabinet in Paris to the nation's prefects; with it followed a show of flags on town halls and war memorials, bell ringing and artillery fire, identical to that which had been choreographed on Armistice Day.[6] But it seems improbable that orders from Paris for a uniform, *national* celebration would have had any meaningful impact on the 523 strong community inhabiting Albert's corrugated-iron nissens and tar-coated huts, or those of the smaller red zone villages in its canton. Bereft of its public buildings since the initial artillery bombardment in September 1914, Albert was still awaiting the delivery from the SRRL of a

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[4] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 26 September 1920.
[5] ADS.261PER9, *Le Réveil de Picardie*, 2 July 1921.
[6] ADS.KZ252, Etat-Major 2e Corps to the prefect, 25 June 1919.

wooden hut in which the mayor could be housed. Across Albert's canton, only 4 other mayors (out of 26) had returned to take office in their villages. The majority of the red zone's communes thus lacked the mayors and the councils responsible for the organisation of local ceremonies and fêtes, the public buildings upon which tricolours could be hung, and the public squares in which collective gatherings could take place. Were their communities inclined to mark the 19 June in the way that the ministry of the interior intended? It seems unlikely. The Versailles conference may have provided a legal framework to the optimistic war-cry of *ils paieront* but the future of the red zone itself remained uncertain. Not until the following month, when the Somme's mayors met at the first post-war departmental conference, were the red zone communities able to argue in any meaningful way against the state's plans for the repurchase, reforestation and probable death of their ruined villages. A clearer indication of the prevailing mood in the red zone in this period can be gauged from reactions to the visit of Georges Clemenceau in July 1919. Hugh Clout states that amidst the flag waving, Clemenceau 'faced hostile groups of returnees' who demanded a speedy resolution to the ambiguities surrounding the issues of restoration and reconstruction in their region.[7]

War remembrance, as Jay Winter has observed, was essentially a process of both remembering and forgetting. Winter writes:

> Transcendence was a privilege, not a commonplace event. To remember the anxiety of 1,000 days of warfare also entailed how to forget; in the inter-war years, those who couldn't obliterate the nightmares were locked in mental asylums throughout Europe. Most people were luckier, they knew both remembering and forgetting and by living through both, they at least had the chance to transcend the terrible losses of war.[8]

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[7] Clout, *After the Ruins*, p.104.

[8] Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p.2.

Winter's thoughts are not too far removed from those which were penned by Henri Barbusse in *Le feu*: imagining a world beyond the filthy confines of his trench, the soldier Bertrand foresaw the importance that the process of forgetting would assume amongst the communities which survived the conflict:

> The Future! The Future! The work of the future will be to wipe out the present, to wipe it out more than we can imagine, to wipe it out like something abominable and shameful. And yet this present- it had to be, it had to be![9]

In both cases our attention is drawn towards the cathartic element of remembrance. Implicit in this is an aesthetic dimension. Collective remembrance is a cathartic experience in so much as it is able to divert the thoughts of individuals away from the horror of their own experiences of combat or the abyss of bereavement. Painful, risky, personal memories of war are transcended by a collective endorsement of sacrifice as worthy and patriotic.[10] Remembrance ceremonies provide a form of refuge from the isolation of individual trauma by assuming the role of 'rituals of legitimation'.[11] But to function effectively, they rely upon an intricate visual vocabulary, of which flags, patriotic monuments, civic buildings such as town halls and the public spaces surrounding them are but some of the basic elements. For the memory of war death to be rendered safe, it must also become wholly divorced from the filth of the battlefield; defined instead by carefully chosen inscriptions on the pristine stone surface of the war memorial. In the red zone of the Somme, many of these essential support mechanisms which would sustain a sanitised representation of war elsewhere in France, were absent. How would its communities transcend the horrors of the Great War, when the corpses of the dead remained a constant feature in their fields? When the discarded weaponry

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[9] Quoted in Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme* (London, 2003), p.16.
[10] Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, (Oxford, 1995), p.9.
[11] Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-49*, (Oxford, 1994), p.10.

of the conflict continued to claim civilian lives, engender fear and strip from the war a sense of finality? When post-war communities were marked not only by the loss of fallen soldiers, but by the absence of prominent civilians: the mayors, councillors and other public figures whose role in the 'stage-management' of remembrance was crucial.[12] In order to explore the complexities of collective remembrance in the Somme, we need firstly to consider the responses of communities which lived beyond the ruins of the Western Front.

For an insight in to the most formally structured and socially inclusive rituals of remembrance, our attention is drawn to Antoine Prost's exhaustive study of the commemorations which took place in inter-war France. Central to Prost's interpretation of their function, is the notion of legitimation. Ceremonies of this nature took place to provide a formal endorsement of war death as an acceptable form of sacrifice for the *patrie.* It is a facet of collective remembrance which requires a public acknowledgement from the participating community. At various stages in the ceremony, a mayor, a war veteran or a guest speaker would be likely to strike this note in his address to the congregation. School children would be called upon to chant *mort pour la France* in response to each of the names read from the roll of honour. The congregation as a whole would invariably mark the climax of the ceremony by singing *La Marseillaise.* 'Without doubt,' writes Prost, 'this is a civic ceremony and all of its participants accept the legitimacy of the sacrifices made for the *Patrie.* For them, the *Patrie* has real meaning and it is right that men died for it.'[13] The concept of legitimacy is not however absolute. Prost recognises that the meaning attached the sacrifices of local sons is ultimately qualified by an examination of the moral qualities of a

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[12] Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War,* (London, 1997) p.210. Bourke writes: 'Death was not entirely in the hands of the creator; it had many stage-managers.'

[13] Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la societé française 1914-1939,*(Paris, 1977), (3 vols), Vol.3 p.62

commune's civilian mourners. The act of publicly reminding civilian congregations of their debt towards the fallen soldiers (and their social obligations towards one another) was central to the ceremonial speeches of mayors and took the form of an *interrogation orale*. Here the relative moral strengths of *them* (the dead) and *us* (the civilian elements of the surviving community) were critically assessed.[14] By so anchoring the notion of legitimacy in the moral comportment of post-war communities, the cathartic element of remembrance was revealed. In commemorating the sacrifices of others, post-war communities were reminded of the redemptive possibilities which lay within their own moral codes. If anything was truly *remembered* in ceremonies of this nature, it was less the unpalatable nature of war death, than the public duties of those who survived it.[15]

Rituals of legitimation, as Thierry Hardier has shown, also drew upon concepts of cleanliness and individuality when evoking the memory of the war dead.[16] Hardier commences *Combattre et mourir pendant le Grande Guerre 1914-1925*, with the gruesome spectacle of *cent mille façons de mourir à la guerre.* Images of soldiers asphyxiated by gas, immolated by flame throwers and drowned in the quagmire of the battlefield are but three of the many forms of war death outlined by the author. Despite the obvious temptation to dwell upon the nihilistic undertone of death in the Great War, Hardier remains sensitive to the paradox which would fashion the manner of its remembrance. Without precedent either in its scale or degree of sophistication, the experience of industrialised slaughter on the Western Front ultimately strengthened the resolve of civilian communities to look upon war death in terms

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[14] Ibid.,pp.56-7.

[15] Durkheim's theory suggests collective mourning to be an enforced public duty. Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory*, p.18.

[16] Though he does not touch upon the Great War, George Vigarello's book *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1988) has been influential to my approach.

of individual sacrifice rather than mass anonymity. Consequently the process of reconstructing the identity of the dead would consume the energy of European society in 1914-18 as never before.[17] Hardier provides an illustration when he points out that in December 1915 a law was passed granting all French and allied soldiers the right to a headstone funded by the state for the first time in military history.[18] In previous conflicts, the role of the dead in shaping memories of national battles had been peripheral, their marginality revealed in the decay and neglect which invariably befell their provisional field graves.[19] By inscribing names in to stone, the centrality of an individual to national forms of remembrance would be affirmed in perpetuity. A sense of identity, order and individual space would be rescued from the mass of bodies which littered the fields; many of the war dead would recover their names and through this could be represented in a manner which disassociated them from the abject nature of their deaths.

Further legislation passed by the French state in September 1920 emphasises the centrality of individual identity to the culture of war remembrance. Following national appeals for a 'demobilisation of the dead', field exhumations, shipments and localised reburials were legally sanctioned. By 1922 some 300,00 bodies -around 40% of all identifiable French war dead- had been dispersed in this manner.[20] Far from stripping away patriotic meaning from death in the Great War, the dispersal of corpses from national military cemeteries to local graveyards struck a deep chord with a Barrèsian conception of nationhood, hinging on *la terre et les morts*.[21] Courageous *poilus* who had responded to the call to arms (in his wartime

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[17] Thomas.W Laqueur, "Memory and Naming in the Great War" in John Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations: the Politics of National Identity* (New Jersey, 1994), p.156.
[18] Thierry Hardier, *Combattre et mourir pendant la Grande Guerre, 1914-1925* (Paris, 2001), p.122.
[19] Laqueur, "Memory and Naming in the Great War" p.152:
[20] Winter, *Sites of memory, Sites of Mourning*, p.26.
[21] Carroll, *French Literary Fascism*, p.21.

work, *Les traits éternels de la France*, Barrès attributed the call to arms to the voices of France's dead ancestors[22]), were honoured by being returned to their native villages and reunited with the regional soil. Divorced though they may be from the overt patriotic trappings of a military cemetery, the individual war graves which are to be found in local cemeteries throughout France remain loaded with meanings which are central to the mythology of *la France éternelle*. Peasant-soldiers who were *déraciné* by war, became *enraciné* in death: here the harsh reality of mass death in the Great War could be softened through a tangible reconstruction of familial and regional lineage.

Collective desires to construct a thoroughly sanitised representation of war death, were shaped by pre-existing rituals of mourning and remembrance. In this issue, Philippe Ariès's examination of the customs which evolved in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is highly pertinent. Ariès has argued that a growing desire for privacy and a heightened sensitivity towards intrusion have defined the rituals of mourning since the mid-nineteenth century. In the event of death, access to the body of the deceased has become limited to a select group of bereaved family members and friends. For those outside this group, the uninvited act of viewing the physical reality of the corpse is considered an act of base voyeurism: a transgression of a social code which serves to deny the intrinsic uncleanness of the corpse by marginalising it. Death in the modern age, observes Ariès, has been 'driven in to secrecy.'[23]

> Death no longer inspires fear solely because if its absolute negativity; it also turns the stomach, like any nauseating spectacle. It becomes improper, like the biological acts of man, the secretions of the human body. It is indecent to let someone die in public. It is no longer acceptable to let someone in to a room that smells of urine, sweat and gangrene and where the sheets are soiled. Access to this room must be forbidden to

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[22] Maurice Barrès, *Les traits éternelles de la France* (Paris, 1916), p.4.
[23] Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, (London, 1981), p.562.

> all but a few inmates capable of overcoming their disgust...A new image of death is forming: the ugly and hidden death, hidden because it is ugly and dirty.[24]

Similar observations have been made by Julia Kristeva, in *The Powers of Horror*. Shielding the corpse from the public gaze is of paramount importance if societies are to maintain clear boundaries between cleanliness and filth. To encounter the corpse is thus to confront the place where such classifications lose their definition, where *meaning*, the essential element of remembrance, collapses altogether:

> If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be...the corpse, the most sickening of wastes is a border which has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border?...I behold the breaking down of a world which has erased its borders.[25]

The sanitised models of mourning presented here, seem to ignore the significance of a class dimension. It should be stressed that other writers -Joanna Bourke for example- are less inclined towards an assumption of universality in the culture of mourning.[26] Nevertheless, both Ariès and Kristeva point towards a crucial element which would emerge in the stage-management of *war death*, that of defining and controlling the ways in which 'the most sickening of wastes' could be confronted. That post-war societies felt somehow compelled to confront the scale of wastage of the Great War in a meaningful way is beyond doubt. The millions of Frenchmen and women who travelled as pilgrims and tourists to the battlefields of northern France in the 1920s bear witness to the patriotic weight which was attached to a personal encounter with the ruins of the Western Front. And whilst the provisional towns

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[24] Ibid.,p.569.
[25] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror, an Essay on Abjection*, (New York,1982), pp. 3-4
[26] Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, p.211

themselves (with the 'exotic' spectacle of their multicultural communities) may have engendered a certain element of voyeurism amongst the red zone's spectators, it is apparent that crowd behaviour was radically modified within the physical parameters of the military cemeteries which formed the crucial stepping-stones of the nation's *via sacra*. Here, concepts of cleanliness had acquired a stronger grip over the process of remembrance than ever before. The dead would be honoured by manicured lawns, uniform shrubs and pristine headstones, which served to distance all representations of death from worrisome notions of filth and decay. Linguistic formulae of remembrance also provided a sanitised prism through which the dead would be viewed. Soldiers who found a definitive resting place in one of the *nécropoles nationales* in northern France, did so under the ubiquitous patriotic epitaph of *mort pour la France*. Language not only triumphed over the physicality of death in communicating the memory of war, but was *seen* to do so. Similar concepts of hygiene and secrecy governed the exhumation of war dead from the western front and their transportation to local cemeteries throughout France. Everyone of the 300,000 exhumed bodies was transported across France by train at night rather than during the day. Their points of departure and arrival were specifically designated railway stations, all located on the extreme periphery of a department's principal city, in order to lessen the chance of attracting unwanted attention. In the Somme, the chosen station for the transport of bodies was that of Longueau, situated 5 km from Amiens. The desire to shield the bodies of the war dead from the public gaze went further. Each of the exhumed soldiers was transported in a coffin fitted with an interior metal box. Failing this, exhumation companies were required to provide coffins with a guaranteed level of air-tightness.[27]

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[27] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 26 December 1920.

From this perspective of post-war remembrance, influenced as it was by a desire for order and cleanliness to mirror the ideals of *la guerre moralisatrice*[28], we may perhaps reassess Jay Winter's description of the psychological state of European society in the aftermath of the Great War. Europeans, he has argued 'imagined the post-war world as composed of survivors perched on a mountain of corpses.'[29] Powerfully nihilistic though the hold of the war dead may have been upon the French imagination, it is clear that 'the mountain of corpses' was ultimately represented in a way which either ignored or marginalised many of its more abject characteristics. In France, its actual size remained an unknown factor until the mid-1920s, when through the research of the deputy Louis Marin, (dubbed *le réveilleur de morts*), a report was produced and a figure of 1,357,800 French war dead was revealed.[30] Images of war death were likewise shrouded in secrecy. When the British film *The Battle of the Somme* reached French cinemas in September 1916 (the battle not yet over), brief footage of soldiers climbing over the top and being cut down by enemy fire (only four such deaths were recorded by the cameras) was deemed unsuitable for domestic audiences by the Prefecture in Paris and edited from the film. So too were images of soldiers returning to their trenches with injured comrades. Michel Corday commented that the horror of the war remained hidden from the French by politicians who aimed to sustain a level of 'chauvinistic jubilation which permitted no sense of remorse.'[31]Winter rightly shows us that in the immediate aftermath of the war, the cinematic representation of the dead was considerably more extreme. He describes the dream scene in Abel Gance's *J'accuse* as 'one of the most powerful and haunting visions of the Great War.'[32] Dead soldiers arise from their resting place in the

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[28] E.J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War One (Cambridge, 1979)*, p.18. Leed writes 'The most unsettling features of the landscape of war for many combatants, lay in the constant transgression of those distinctions that preserve order and cleanliness.'
[29] Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p.17.
[30] Hardier, *Combattre et mourir* pp.333-335
[31] Corday, *L'envers de guerre*, p.21.
[32] Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p.15.

battlefield and return to their former homes in the interior of France to observe the lives of those whom they had left behind. There they encounter only pettiness, social divisions and moral laxity; the self sacrifice of the dead heroes for the *patrie* appears to have been made in vain. Images which served to warn civilian France to awaken from its moral turpitude, lest the filth of the battlefield spilt over in to its towns and villages, were not unique to Gance's film. A remarkably similar nightmare sequence would form the climax of Roland Dorgelès's novel *Le réveil des morts*. Like Henri Barbusse, Dorgelès had seen active service on the Western Front, despite being considered unfit for the military in 1914. His experiences of life in the trenches would provide material for his most famous novel, *Les croix de bois*, which was awarded the *Prix Goncourt* in 1919. *Le réveil des morts* was published in 1923 and focussed upon the battlefields in the aftermath of the war. Set in the red zone of the Aisne department (where the author spent several months) and based loosely around the social tensions aroused in a provisional town during the reconstruction period, many passages in the novel revealed a veteran's obsession with the corpse. As with Gance's *J'accuse* and Barbusse's *Le feu*, Dorgelès's representation of the dead gave his work a clear political dimension. Dead *poilus* would be roused from their graves by the fury they felt at social injustices which continued to define post-war society. Dorgelès's dead heroes were perhaps more confrontational than those of Gance and found targets on whom to vent their fury in the entrepreneurs who had discovered in the mass graves of northern France a lucrative source of income, unfaithful wartime wives and any who had financially profited from the carnage of 1914-18:

> Each one of them realised that they were responsible for one of the dead, a corpse with whom they now had to settle their accounts, a corpse whose hateful look was impossible to bear, when he emerged suddenly from his grave to ask:
> 'What have you done?'

> All who had cheated, acted immorally, stolen or betrayed felt an ice cold sweat over come them at the thought that their dead were returning. The fear showed them to be ignoble. They fought between themselves. Guilty women fought with their lovers, profiteers ran to prostrate themselves at the doors of the church, or fled towards the station, their wallets stuffed, their pearls in their handbags...[33]

For both Gance and Dorgelès, it is arguable that the image of the dead returning from the battlefield was one which invited feelings of redemption rather than abject horror.[34] The dead assumed the authority of Christ, their resurrection symbolising a day of judgement for post-war France. Apocalyptic though the imagery was, it remained true to an essential commemorative theme in urging France to honour its dead by showing faith in the ideals of social justice and civic duty. If *J'accuse* and *Le réveil des morts* pointed an accusatory finger, they also offered their audiences comfort by suggesting that in acting morally, the dead would return to rest within the sanitised confines of their cemeteries, content that the *patrie* had remained loyal to the spirit of unity and selflessness established in 1914. In such representations of war death, morality and patriotism thus emerged as a means of keeping the abject memories of war at bay. Moral correctness would ensure that the 'mountain of corpses' did not erase the crucial borders between cleanliness and filth, upon which the catharsis of remembrance depended.

The Politics of Remembrance

Abel Gance's *J'accuse* was originally filmed in 1918, using a cast of solders who had been temporarily released from duty by the French government specifically for the project. Jay

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[33] Roland Dorgelès, *Le réveil des morts* (Paris, 1923), pp. 295-6.
[34] Winter, *Sites of memory, Sites of Mourning*, pp.15-17.

Winter has observed that some of the men who appeared as ghosts from the battlefield in the film did in fact return to front-line action and met their deaths before the armistice in November 1918. In this sense, Winter concludes 'representation and reality had become one.'[35] The confusion of distinctions between representation and reality has a certain relevance to the dynamics of post-war memory in the Somme's red zone. But in this environment, representation and reality could not be said to have experienced an artistic fusion; instead they operated as opposing forces, exposing the fragility of their border.

Where might we discover characteristics of post-war remembrance which were both specific to the devastated regions of France and shaped by the features of the post-war landscape? Useful points of reference are the ceremonies which took place to commemorate the 11 November. In 1920, the 11 November ceremony was integrated with a national *Fête Cinquantenaire* to mark the fiftieth year of the Third Republic. In compliance with the prefect's orders (and with the help of a financial contribution from Amiens) a 'patriotic demonstration' was organised in Albert, beginning with a gathering at the 1870 war memorial before moving to the military cemetery and concluding with a speech 'in honour of the dead French and English heroes who died for France in the war of 1914-18', which was delivered by an English officer.[36] The ceremony was reported in *La Gazette de Péronne*:

> Having saluted the monument of 1870, bereft of the artistic and symbolic statue which was stolen by the *Boches*, and having laid a superb commemorative wreath, the congregation moved through the Rue Mazagran, Rue Jeanne-d'Harcourt, Rue de Bapaume and Rue de Péronne, to the military cemetery, where once there stood a magnificent column, though today there remains only debris. The place of honour went to the glorious war cripples of Albert, framed by tricolours. As soon as the hymn *To Victory* and *La Marseillaise* had been sung by the school children, the names of the 204 soldiers who fell on the field of battle were called out, and on the tenth name,

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[35] Winter, *Sites of memory, Sites of Mourning*, p.15.
[36] AMA. Council minutes, 8 November 1920.

the flag fell to half mast as a sign of mourning, whilst the children of the town responded in unison with *'Morts Pour la France!'* This was the most moving part of the ceremony....

After the laying of wreaths by the memorial committee, the veterans and by the *Racing-Club*[37], the English offered some words in memory of the French soldiers. Mr.Taylor, a former officer of the 3rd British army provided a magnificent discourse, in an accent which everyone savoured, and which all would have cheered, had the majesty of the occasion not demanded a certain reserve: 'Ladies and Gentlemen, having served in the 3rd British army, known as the army of the Somme, it is a great honour to have been chosen to lay a wreath in the imperishable memory of the French soldiers who died for their country and to address you on behalf of the English in Albert. This wreath is a symbol of our high esteem and our respect for our courageous comrades of the French army and a measure of our loyal friendship to the great French nation....Not only do we want to offer homage to the glorious dead and their families, but also to the Republic, whose fiftieth anniversary we are celebrating today, and to the great nation which remains at the forefront of civilisation; the great nation so tested by war, in which we all trust to one day re-emerge, like a phoenix, stronger than ever before. To the memory of the glorious dead, to the honour of their families and to the glory of France, long live France and the Entente Cordiale! [38]

If the choice of an English speaker, and his reference to a pheonix-like resurrection from the ashes of war reflected specific aspects of local memory, it is clear that the ceremony as a whole conformed with the most ideological themes of national commemoration. Despite the omnipresence of devastation, we search in vain for the sense of grief and embitterment which provoked two communes in the interior to remember their own blood tax via the memorial inscription of *Maudite Soit La Guerre.*[39] Guided by the convictions of the town's new mayor Abel Pifre, death (as the English officer persistently reminded the congregation) remained *glorieux* even amongst the rubble of the red zone; sacrifice maintained its sense of legitimacy and patriotic meaning; devastation was something of a badge of honour, unique to the 'advanced guard of the front-line.' Similarly upheld was a hierarchical structure to guide the collective remembrance of the dead. Albert's dead soldiers, whose names were read out

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[37] *Le Racing-Club des Albertins* was the local football team.
[38] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne,* 21 November 1920.
[39] See Annette Becker, *Les monuments aux morts: mémoire de la Grande Guerre,* (Paris, 1988), p.70-75.

individually, were grouped under the oral epitaph of *enfants de la ville, morts pour la patrie.* Dead civilians however, were merely recalled as 'victims of the bombardment' and did not warrant individual mention. Similar though the manner of their deaths may have been, distinctions between passive victims and patriotic heroes remained central to the meaning of the ceremony: civilian tragedies amidst the devastation of battle could not be seen to compromise the ideological legitimacy of the conflict as a whole. In Albert's formal ceremony of remembrance, it is apparent that the linguistic boundaries which governed national mythologies of war were wholly accepted. Remembrance, as a process of divorcing memories from the filth of the battlefield *appeared* as tenable in Albert, as it did in Marseille or Paris, Lyon or Brest.

Despite the heady rhetoric of the Armistice ceremony in Albert, it is clear that the geography of devastation in the Somme exerted a profound influence upon the process of remembrance. Many communes in the red zone were marked by a wholesale absence of mayors, councillors and *fonctionnaires*. For Thiepval's 16 returnees, the principal concerns in November 1920 appear to have been the necessity of a coal delivery from Albert to provide the commune with sufficient fuel for the winter.[40] In Beaumont-Hamel, deliveries of food and winter clothing were likewise the most pressing issue, the commune having been largely ignored by the departmental *bureau de bienfaisance* due to its inaccessibility from the red zone's highways.[41] For these communes, silence reigned on 11 November. The frontiers of remembrance are similarly revealed by the contrasting speeds with which the department's communes commenced the process of memorial construction. Here too, the geography of the front-line made its post-war presence felt. On the coastal plains of the Somme, some 40 km

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[40] ADS.5Z70, Thiepval, affaires communales, *sous-prefet* to M.Picard, 4 November 1920.
[41] ADS.5Z6, Beamont-Hamel, affaires communales.

West of Amiens and far from the trenches of 1914-18, the municipal councils of communes such as Bourse-ville and Villers-Campart finalised plans for the erection of a memorial in July 1920.[42] Untouched by the devastation which defined the north-eastern areas of the department, their timescale of deliberation, design, erection and inauguration was no different from that of post-war communes throughout the interior.[43] But in communes located around the fringes of the 1914-18 front-line, the pace of memorial construction was slower. Buire-sur-Ancre (located 5 km south-west of Albert) was partially destroyed in 1914-18; subscriptions for a war memorial did nor begin in the village until the Autumn of 1923. By November of that year, a *stèle* was placed in the narrow space which existed between the ruined church and the mayor's office, inscribed with the words 'Buire-sur-Ancre A Ses Enfants Morts Pour La Patrie'.[44] Albert's own memorial (a *coq* on a *stèle*, inscribed with the images of an anvil and a plough and the words 'Albert A Ses Enfants') was completed in May 1924 at a cost of 3,200 francs.[45] Further into the red zone, the patterns of memorialisation become increasingly uneven and disjointed. In 1922, both Bazentin (whose mayor was an *ancien combattant*) and Pozières (whose memorial committee consisted of three *anciens combattants* and a *mutilé de guerre*) began deliberations and fund raising for the erection of memorial.[46] They are however, isolated examples, contrasting sharply with the prevailing attitudes in the canton. Aveluy did not begin deliberations for a monument until November 1924, La Boisselle's memorial committee wasn't formed until March 1925; in Beaumont-Hamel, council deliberations on the erection of a war memorial began in March 1932; in Beaucourt-sur-Ancre, the war memorial committee remained short of the funds required for a monument until 1936. Auchonvillers erected its monument in 1937. The initial

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[42] ADS.99R334017, Déliberations des conseils municipaux.
[43] The majority of war memorials were erected in France between 1918-21.
[44] ADS.99R334023, Dossiers par commune.
[45] AMA. Council minutes, May 1924.
[46] ADS.5Z5, Bazentin, affaires communales; ADS.5Z61, Pozières, affaires communales.

work on the structure was not satisfactory however. The project dragged on until its completion in July 1939, just six weeks before the outbreak of the Second World War.[47]

It would be highly plausible to argue that the delays in memorial inauguration were uniquely the consequence of the physical impediments faced by red zone communities. By pointing out the absence of churches and town halls in which to hang memorial plaques, squares in which to build statues, logical explanations as to why certain communes were unable to remember the Great War via the same aesthetic formulae of their neighbours may be found. But to focus purely upon an absence of bricks and mortar is to ignore some of the other unsettling features of the red zone; aspects of a social and physical environment which denied meaning to communities in mourning. To assess the significance of the absence of war memorials in the red zone, we must first establish an idea of the functions which they were intended to serve. We need to enquire whether a war memorial's message is contained solely within its visual form; does it convey a single interpretation on the memory of war, one which is universally accessible to those who encounter it? Or are there various ways of looking at a monument, layers of significance and meaning, some of which are exclusive to the generations who were participants in its conception? The generational issue may be of particularly use here: for those who were born *after* the period in which a local memorial was inaugurated, the meaning of a monument is divorced from the process by which it was created. It is more a *monument historique* than a *lieu de mémoire*, a useful landmark or meeting point, an edifice which is indivisible from the structure of the town around it. The message it conveys is based purely on what is seen, and as a result, its significance is lessened. But for members of communities who participated in debates surrounding design, inscription and geographical location, who contributed materially through subscriptions to a

[47] ADS.99R334021, Questionaires aux Communes

communal memorial fund, the meaning of a war memorial stretches beyond the appearance it acquired as a complete entity. Public deliberations upon the aesthetic form of a monument were essential to the process of forgetting. In the democratic forum of town halls and assembly rooms, personal memories of war would be re-worked and re-shaped to find coherence with the public language of remembrance.[48] Collective linguistic formulas of remembrance would themselves be worked in to the imagery of the memorial, their meanings acquiring extra authority by being literally set in stone. Collective participation was not however a formula which guaranteed social harmony. In the Somme, left wing newspapers such as *Le Réveil de Picardie* voiced their disapproval of communal disputes over war memorials, arguing that edifices designed to glorify the memory of the dead of France were being used as a pretext to resume political rivalries and settle old social scores.[49] Divisive though some may have been, the intense debates which took place over war memorials throughout France, contributed to the process of transcendence as fully as the aesthetics of the finished product. As well as honouring the dead, war memorials also honoured the living. Implicit in their visual vocabulary was a recognition of the generosity of each commune; a powerful endorsement of their specific beliefs about war, death and the mourning process.

In Albert's ruined canton, there is little evidence of formal, public debate shaping the memory of war in its immediate aftermath. Instead, silence appears to reign once more. In September 1920, a questionnaire was sent from the prefect to all mayors in the Somme, asking whether deliberations had taken place over proposals for a local *monument aux morts*. No reply was received from the mayors of Miraumont, Grandcourt, Pys and Courcelette. In Beaucourt, the lack of post-war returnees was cited as the principal factor in the

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[48] Alistair Thomson's work on post-war remembrance in Australia has been useful here. See *Anzac Memories*, pp. 9-11.
[49] ADS.261PER9, *Le Réveil de Picardie*, 8 October 1921.

postponement of the commune's decision. In Bécordel-Bécourt, communal debate on the issue was deemed an impossibility. The mayor of Authuille responded to the questionnaire in the following terms: 'Given the difficulties which we face at the moment, it is impossible for us to consider erecting a monument.'[50] In Albert, the existence of a memorial committee since 1919 reflected the comparative social and economic strengths of the town, but here too, remembrance remained a complex and contentious issue. The issue of war memorials was discussed on two occasions by the council in 1920 and 1921. On both occasions, tentative proposals to begin formal deliberations were rejected by the council. At the first post-war council meeting of January 1920, a circular from the prefect promising subsidies to all communes which erected a monument was the twelfth item of discussion. Problems such as flooding in the town, caused by the wartime pulverisation of the Ancre river bed, a growing number of returnees demanding provisional housing and delays in the assessment of the town's war damage claim, loomed far larger than the issue of war remembrance. One councillor, Oscar Lefèbvre,(a prominent Catholic figure and *ancien combattant*) derided the Republic's offer of financial help by responding that as Albert was completely impoverished, the state ought to undertake the entire financial commitment for a memorial.[51] One year later, the issue was raised again, when the memorial committee proposed to organise a fête in order to raise money for a memorial fund. Wary of the council's negative position in the previous year, the mayor Abel Pifre blocked the proposal. Asking *Albertins* to provide money for a memorial was considered to be 'controversial.'[52]

The decision to obstruct and delay the work of the memorial committee was politically motivated. It revealed the extent to which the politics of reconstruction influenced the town's

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[50] ADS.99R334016, Questionnaires aux communes, September 1920.
[51] AMA. Council minutes, 8 January 1920.
[52] AMA. Council minutes, 14 March 1921.

willingness to conform with and commit itself to national themes of commemoration. Five months prior to this decision (in October 1920), the memorial committee *had* been able to organise a musical concert to raise funds for a patriotic monument, an event which was described by the *Gazette de Péronne* as 'a beautiful demonstration of the life which exists in the ruins.'[53]In December 1920 however, councils across the red zone had received a devastating financial blow from the French treasury. Wary of its perilous economic position in the wake of Germany's decision to reject the financial obligations with which it had been saddled at the Versailles conference, the government had slashed its annual reconstruction budget by 5 billion francs, from 12 to 7 billion francs. The diminished budget sent out an unequivocally bleak message to the red zone. Far from fulfilling the commitment towards total reconstruction which had been made by the Prime Minister, Viviani, at the beginning on the war (a promise which had acquired legislative form in the law of 17 April 1919), the government appeared to be tailoring the scale of the reconstruction programme around the financial capacity of the German treasury.[54] Given the embitterment which was already fostered towards the state throughout the devastated regions, it was a dangerous political manoeuvre. The president of the *Société de la Reconstruction de Rheims* warned mayors across the Western Front that the state was preparing to drastically redefine its obligations towards the red zone, instead of balancing any financial shortfall from Germany with reserves drawn from the pocket of the interior. Rheims assumed the leadership of a rebellion against the government and called upon fellow councils across the devastated regions to reject the budget by resigning en-masse.[55] The Rheims stance was accepted by Albert's council and found much support in the Somme's red zone.*La Voix des Ruines* responded to the bleak financial news from Paris with a cartoon depicting the misery of life in a nissen hut,

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[53] ADS.241PER2 *La Gazette de Péronne*, October 1920
[54] De Sousa, *La reconstruction et sa mémoire*, pp.75-78.
[55] AMA. Council Minutes, 11 January 1921.

in which a child begged of his mother: 'Will our Miseries be over in 1921?' 'We can hardly believe that such an insensitive and monstrously unjust plan for the restoration of our unhappy region could be conceived' was its blunt conclusion.[56]

Similarly revealing as to the complexities of collective remembrance in the Somme was the issue of *trophées de guerre*. Throughout 1920, surplus stocks of weaponry in the state arsenals at Versailles and Laon had been made available to communes which wished to add a military and artistic dimension to the memorials they were planning to construct. In the undamaged regions of the Somme, the desire to enhance the patriotic message of a memorial by claiming possession of cannons, machine guns and shells is evident. Beaucamps-Le-Vieux (70 Km west of the red zone) requested 8 artillery shells from Laon. So too did Arianes (40 km west of the red zone) with the additional order of a cannon. Amongst the vast majority of communes which lay beyond the fringes of the Somme's front-line an average of four shells would be requested from the state arsenal, the calibre of each explosive being specified by its mayor in each case. At Chaussoy-Epagny however, the desire for war trophies was unmatched in the department. Here the commune requested the following artefacts: 1 German machine gun, 2 cavalry swords, 2 pistols, 2 revolvers, 2 hand held machine guns, 6 military helmets, 2 shells, 4 bayonets, 2 mortars.[57] In the red zone of the Somme, the offer of weaponry by the state arsenals was met with silence. Over one hundred communes lay within the cantonal boundaries of Albert, Ham, Roisel and Péronne, but not one of them would make a request for weaponry as a patriotic adornment to their provisional towns. Given the poor quality of the *désobusage* in the early months of peace (in which immense amounts of lethal explosives had merely been covered up with top soil by POW labour), their lack of

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[56] ADS.265PER1, *La Voix des Ruines,* 8 January 1921.
[57] ADS.KZ2558, Trophées de Guerre.

enthusiasm for items of ornamental weaponry is understandable. Aside from the underlying violence which plagued the provisional towns, most communes continued to suffer a high post-war death toll amongst labourers charged with restoring the earth; in Épehy, farm workers had refused to go out in to the fields due to the dangerous levels of explosives which remained there;[58] Thiepval's sole returnee in the initial aftermath of the war, Marie-Louise Duthart, was described as being 'extremely nervous' due to the explosions which took place in close proximity to her provisional hut.[59]In the light of this, the message sent from Albert to the arsenal at Laon seems particularly revealing; 2 cannons would be accepted by town on behalf of the canton as a whole, but under no circumstances were they to be accompanied with shells.[60]The mayor of Albert also sent an additional request to Laon for extra revolvers and rounds of ammunition to be delivered to the town with the German cannons. These items were not destined for the ornamental or educational role they would serve at Chuassoy-Epagny however; they reflected the growing problem of policing the lawless foreign elements in the provisional town.[61]

Much of the controversy and ill-feeling which surrounded the issue of memorialisation may also have been generated by the terms of the state's offer of financial help. A law had been passed by the National Assembly in October 1919 granting a degree of financial help to local communes, but this fell far short of providing the support which red zone councillors such as Oscar Lefèbvre believed they were owed. The *concours financier de l'état* of 1919 defined the state's commitment in the following words:

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[58] ADS.KZ1093, Mayor of Éphey to the director of the SRRL, 12 January 1921. The mayor demanded the return of shell clearance teams in order to 'calm the nerves of the population.'
[59] ADS.5Z70, commissaire speciale d'Albert to the *sous-préfet*, 2 July 1921.
[60] ADS.KZ2558, Trophées de Guerre.
[61] ADS.5Z75, Albert, affaires communales, prefect to the mayor of Albert. 23 December 1920.

> The law of 26 October 1919 states that subsidies will be accorded by the state to communes in proportion to the efforts and sacrifices which they are prepared to make in order to glorify the dead heroes of the nation.[62]

The specific wording of the law is difficult to ignore. *Sacrifice*, in the language of memorialisation no longer referred uniquely to the blood tax paid by the *poilus*; it had undergone a subtle transformation, referring as much to the financial generosity of civilians as to the soldiers whom they were theoretically glorifying. Of more relevance to the red zone was the total absence of recognition for the sacrifices that had already been made. Were not these the 'advanced guards of the front-line'? Why then, were those who had endured the ravages of war being treated in the same way as those who had been protected from it? If the law demonstrated a profound insensitivity in failing to recognise the specific distress in the red zone, its competitive ethos was nonetheless a persuasive means of invigorating the process of collective remembrance elsewhere in the Somme. Post-war introspection would be superseded by the desire to give and to do so *publicly*. Neighbouring communes would enter in to an unspoken competition with each other to prove their patriotic worth (the hectic post-war scramble by communes for *trophées de guerre* to adorn their monuments is also illustrative of this) and so too would rival benefactors within a single village. Such was the case in the commune of Miséry, a rural village located 10 km to the south of Péronne which suffered both occupation and partial destruction in 1914-18. In March 1921, Monsieur Lalain de Chomel complained to the prefect that his offer to individually finance both the extension to the village cemetery and the construction of its *monument aux morts* had been inexplicably rejected by the mayor. In correspondence with the *Sous-Préfet* of Péronne, the

[62] ADS.99R334017, Subventions de l'état, October 1919.

prefect discovered this was due to a rivalry which existed between Mme Lalain de Chomel and her brother, the *adjoint* to the mayor:

> A rivalry exists between Mme Lalain de Chomel and her brother M.Meurinne, whose gifts to the commune follow on from one another with an obvious desire to outmatch each other. Recently, Mme Lalain de Chomel provided funds for the church altar; straight away, MMeurinne decided to fund the church tower. Unfortunately this rivalry does not take place without bitterness. M.Meurinne had recently offered to fund a marble plaque opposite the provisional school, on which the council has decided to inscribe the names of ten men who lived in Miséry at the time of mobilisation and fell on the battlefield. Mme Lalain de Chomel and her husband wish to give to the commune a monument, but on the condition that the names of their brother and brother-in-law be added. As well as this, Mme Lalain de Chomel and her husband want space to be left on the monument so that the names of Miséry's inhabitants who may be killed in future wars could be added. The municipal council found this excessive![63]

As an insight in to the politics of local remembrance, this episode of inter-family rivalry in Miséry is extremely useful. It begs the question of precisely what aspects of the Great War certain communes (or certain individuals within them) were remembering when they espoused the competitive ethos of memorialisation. Were such monuments conceived and constructed with the unequivocal desire to glorify 'the dead heroes of the nation' as the state intended? Or did they compete and coexist with personal ambitions for self aggrandisement? The council's disapproval of the space allocated on Mme de Lalain de Chomel's proposed monument for the dead of future wars appears to substantiate the latter idea. In the aftermath of a war of unprecedented violence, it not only appeared dismissive of the catastrophe which had taken place, but suggested that donor would not suffer a rival monument, should the slaughter of the Great War be repeated in the future.

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[63] ADS.99R334019, Prefect to the *sous-préfet*, 14 December 1920.

Problematic though this rivalry may have been to the community of Miséry, it illustrates how the cathartic process of forgetting could be enhanced by the presence of ambitious and wealthy inhabitants within a community. Could this single example of charitable competition have been repeated throughout all of the villages of the red zone? It seems unlikely. Though both Mme Lalain de Chomel and M.Meurinne showed great commitment to the cause of remembrance and memorialisation in Miséry, it should be noted that neither had actually returned to reside in the post-war ruins. For those who did resettle in the red zone, other issues dominated. Albert's plea of poverty when the issue of memorialisation was first raised in 1920 may have been informed by the politics of reconstruction, but severe economic distress was a reality throughout all of the smaller red zone communes. In the village of La Boisselle both the mayor and his wife were left dependent on a daily F1.75 *assistance aux vieillards* and informed the prefect that most of the elderly returnees to the village found themselves in a similarly impoverished state.[64] In Beaucourt-sur-Ancre (still bereft of any public buildings in 1927) it was the sale of hunting licenses, rather than public subscription, which provided an annual cash injection to the memorial fund. This reflected both the poverty of its inhabitants (most were still waiting for the state to repurchase their land) and the vast swathes of ruined farmland which remained fallow (and therefore suitable only for the canton's *chasseurs*) throughout the 1920s.[65] The memorial was constructed in the mid 1930s. In Thiepval, memorial subscriptions *did* take place, but in 1928 the council chose instead to use the memorial committee funds to pay off an architect who had been contracted to design the church in Thiepval and St.Pierre Divion.[66] No opposition was recorded. Here, Henri Barbusse's observation that the 'work of the future' would be to 'wipe

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[64] ADS.KZ1093, Mayor of La Boisselle to the prefect, 23 ocotober 1920.

[65] ADS.5Z6, Beaucourt-sur-Ancre, affaires communales Like Thiepval, Beaucourt was largely paralysed by the arguments which surrounded the state purchase of its land in the 1920s.

[66] ADS.5Z70,Thiepval, affaires communales, council minutes, 23 November 1928.

out' the filth of the present, had a very specific pertinence. Lacking any definitive assurance on its future reconstruction (the abandonment of the ruined commune remained a more likely prospect than its rebuilding until 1930), civic acts designed to memorialise the past, remained conceptually difficult, perhaps wholly unfeasible. Like Authuille, Bécordel-Bécort and the other villages which declined to construct a war memorial in the early 1920s, these communities were bereft of the economic and social infrastructures which permitted *representations* of war to gain an ideological grip on local memory. In the heartland of the red zone, it seemed to be shells, craters and the bodies of the dead which shaped the memory of its inhabitants, not plaques and war memorials.

Given the vast reserves of labour employed in the red zone with the single aim of constructing definitive sites of post-war memory, the marginality of its communities appears ever more extreme. Reflecting on the brutal changes brought by war to the identity of the Somme, the *Journal de Péronne* described the land around La Boisselle as a 'vast cemetery, a corner of the British Isles.'[67] Reinventing the post-war landscape in the form described by the paper had required a considerable tenacity, both in the pursuit of corpses (unmarked as many were in field graves) and equally the search for clues to their eventual identities. Body searchers working under the guidance of the Imperial war Graves Commission would cover every square metre of the earth within the red zone, a process which would be repeated in the same field between six and twenty times.[68] The pristine milieux of the 243 British military cemeteries which exist in the Somme were the fruits of this post-war labour. Other forms of military memorial (both British and French) would also be constructed, many of them located at specific points in fields of the canton, marking battlefield locations of specific relevance to

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[67] ADS.246PER2, *Journal de Péronne*, 20 March 1921.

[68] P. Longworth, *The Unending Vigil: a History the Commonwealth War Graves Commission 1917-1967* (London, 1967), p.58.

regimental and regional histories. At Thiepval for instance, the inauguration of the St.Helens Tower, marking the engagement of the 38th Ulster Division in the fields around it, took place on Remembrance Day of 1921. Oak frames were also provided to preserve and strengthen dilapidated trenches close to the tower, for the benefit of the commune's many battlefield tourists.[69] At La Boisselle, representatives of the Scottish and Tyneside and Irish and Tyneside regiments gathered to unveil a memorial to their own dead on the outskirts of the village in 1921. One of the earliest sponsorships of memorialisation in the red zone took place two years earlier in August 1919. A *Comtesse* from the Charente wrote to the prefect promising to finance a memorial in La Boisselle, dedicated to the lives of Breton soldiers who had lost their lives in the Somme.[70]

Whilst each new monument which appeared in the canton served to underline a singular determination to forge a visible *via sacra* through its earth, the impetus for so doing came from communities or individuals far removed from the ruined villages themselves. Was this way of commemorating the earth (and the dead within it) as meaningful to the inhabitants of La Boiselle in 1921, as it was to those living in Ulster, in Tyneside or in Brittany? Seemingly not. For those whose homes were the battlefields of the Great War, representations of patriotic endeavour did little to divert thoughts from the reality of devastation. Landowners in La Boisselle whose territory had been arbitrarily acquired by the French state in 1918 (and then offered as a perpetual gift to Britain as a site of memory for its dead) remained uncompensated and aggrieved, in the mid 1920s.[71] The commune also faced political and administrative struggles to memorialise its own civilian dead. In April 1921, the prefect was informed by the mayor of La Boisselle that the village cemetery, *complètement bouleversée*

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[69] ADS.5Z70, Thiepval, affaires communales de Thiepval.
[70] ADS.5Z59, La Boisselle, affaires communales, prefect to the sous-préfet, August 1919.
[71] ADS.KZ1655, Actes de Vente.

since 1916, was no longer in a fit condition to contain the coffins of the post-war dead. Shell craters on the outskirts of the village (as yet unfilled by the STPU) were instead providing the site for provisional civilian graves, the village dead often being buried with an insufficient covering of earth.[72] Provisional burials -reminiscent of the hastily enacted rituals in the front line field graves of 1914-18- would continue for some months. In March 1922, the destroyed site of the original cemetery was declared irreparable; it would be closed (on the grounds of public health) to public access for five years, prior to being levelled and developed. New land would be acquired for an alternative site of memory, sufficient however to accommodate only the graves of the post-war dead. No such space would be allocated for those wishing to perpetuate the memory of their ancestors through the transfer of graves and headstones.[73]

The problem was general throughout the red zone. Contalmaison's destroyed cemetery was located in the centre of the ruined village. Though sufficient land had been acquired by 1920 to permit the council to transfer some of the commune's pre-war dead, this was limited in scope. Only those who had died in the village between 1909-1914 would be granted burial space in the new cemetery. Due to the intensity of the devastation suffered by the village in 1914-18, an inventory on the 'average state' of the dead was required before the transfer went ahead. The new cemetery was not completed until 1925.[74] Familial remembrance in Épehy was similarly shaped by the horrifying spectacle of the devastation wrought on the local cemetery. In 1921 the mayor had complained that the shell holes which had destroyed the burial ground in 1914-18 remained untouched by the STPU, and demanded that they levelled

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[72] ADS.KZ1093, Mayor of La Boisselle to the prefect, 20 April 1921.
[73] ADS.5Z59, La Boisselle, affaires communales, mayor to the prefect, 26 July 1922.
[74] ADS.5Z17, Contalmaison, affaires communales, *sous-préfet* of Péronne to the mayor of Contalmaison, 24 November 1920

it in the manner of the fields surrounding it. Given the size of Albert, post-war burial problems were unavoidable. The *commission d'hygiene* reported in 1920 that due to the destruction suffered by the local cemetery, little land remained available for future burials. The town's high death rate in the early post-war years rendered this problem acute, as did the growing presence of local men exhumed from the front for the purpose of private reburial.[75] One solution proposed by the mayor was a 330% increase in the price of land concessions.[76] The policy aimed at deterring bereaved families from attempting to purchase space for individual sites of familial memory or from renewing the leases they held on existing plots. It was rejected by the council as an iniquitous burden upon the community. It was also a thoroughly impractical measure. Following the loss of the town's archives in 1914, it was impossible to establish whether the cemetery's concessionaires had purchased their tomb-space in perpetuity or for a limited number of years.[77] A lack of documentation likewise hampered the process of identifying graves; without a plan of the cemetery, memory and guess work were the only means of establishing where individual family graves were located. The most pressing issue was perhaps one of hygiene. The process of *déblaiement* (clearing shattered headstones and closing tombs which had been exposed by the bombing) fell beyond the remit of the STPU, whose labour force was carrying out rubble clearance from the rest of the town. Within the parameters of the cemetery, *déblaiement* was deemed to be the sole responsibility of each concessionary.[78] Given the absence of over 70% of Albert's

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[75] AMA. État-Civil 1919-1932. In 1921 106 deaths were recorded in Albert. This figure is only 30 less than the number recorded in 1932, when the town's population was over twice the size.

[76] AMA. Council minutes, April 1921

[77] Land concessions could be bought for a period of 15 years, 30 years, or in perpetuity.

[78] AMA. Council minutes, 11 November 1921. The problem was shared across the red zone. In January 1921, the mayor of Épehy had written to the prefect and demanded that cemetery, which had been 'completely destroyed by numerous shell holes' be restored by labourers in the same way as the fields which surrounded it. ADS.KZ1093, mayor of Épehy to the prefect, January 1921.

pre-war inhabitants in the first three years of peace, the process took place in haphazard fashion. Destroyed family tombs of non-returning inhabitants thus remained in the same pitiful state that Emile Leturcq had described in August 1918. The cemetery was not fully cleared of its wartime detritus until July 1924, after the council had assumed sole responsibility for the matter and contracted a private company. Like the military cemeteries which dotted the fields of the canton, Albert's own reconstructed civilian burial ground would remain a fragmented site of memory. The bodies contained within 8 family tombs, whose identities had been obliterated by artillery in 1914-18, were simply classified in post-war council records as *inconnus;* a further 17 family plots had been left deserted due to the non-return of pre-war inhabitants. The tombs previously contained within them were classified as *disparus.*[79]

Given the vast terrain covered by the landscape of remembrance across the Western Front, it would be easy to ignore these minor examples of the desecration wrought by the war of 1914-18. Yet the stark contrast between memorialisation in villages such as La Boisselle and the dominant ethos of *military* remembrance demands attention. In resurrecting the individual identities of the dead soldiers of the Great War, we have seen that organisations such as the Imperial War Graves Commission were tireless in their labours. Financially, they were backed by governments which spared little expense in creating an aesthetic form to render their efforts convincing. In Britain, this entailed the mass transportation of Portland stone from Dorset, providing a durable and pristine surface on which to inscribe the names of the dead. In France, aside from the construction of vast military cemeteries, many of the war dead were transferred from the battlefield to their native soil, an act which arguably stands out as the apotheosis of a commitment to the sacrosanct nature of individual memory. But in

[79] AMA. Council minutes, 21 July 1924.

civilian enclaves of the of the Western Front, we are struck by a profound anomaly. Here two of the fundamental aspects of remembrance- individual space and identity- had been stripped from civilian sites of memory. Here, local inhabitants of La Boisselle were forced to plead their case with the prefect; asking that the bones of their families be simply transferred to the newly consecrated ground, without a specific plot, in a marginal space *sans outre forme.*[80] Whilst desecration may have been universal to the red zone in 1914-18, memorial reconstruction in its aftermath was somewhat more exclusive in the form it took. In the very villages which took their place in the landscape of remembrance as symbols of *la France éternelle* -skeletal communes deemed capable of drawing back peasants whose wish was to live once more alongside *les chers morts disparus*- the contrast between reality and the symbolic apparatus constructed to feed the collective imagination of post-war Europe, was at its most intense.

This brings us to the issue of silence. Why were debates on war memorials so strikingly absent from many of the villages in the centre of the red zone, when elsewhere in France the process seemed essential to the collective transcendence of trauma and bereavement? Clearly we need to look beyond the obvious problems of rubble filled squares, of ruined town halls and recognise other features which rendered the red zone a psychologically barren environment for civic memorials to the Great War. Here, the filth of the battlefield *had* encroached upon the borders of cleanliness; here, 'ugly and dirty' death was not hidden, but exposed. *Fossoyeurs* working on excavations of communal pits (they often worked in a state of inebriation in order to shield themselves from the stench of the corpses) encountered bodies on a daily basis.[81] So too did the peasants, STPU labourers and shell clearance teams

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[80] ADS.5Z59, La Boisselle Affaires Communales, mayor to the prefect, 26 July 1922.
[81] R.Meissel, *La Picardie dans la Grande Guerre 1914-18*, p.177.

working alongside them in the fields. For peasants (whose presence in the ruins had done so much to invigorate post-war mythologies of *la France éternelle*) the incompatibilities of remembrance and restoration were cruelly self evident. The painstaking process of body identification (essential though this was to the commemorative theme of naming and locating the war dead) constituted a fundamental impediment to the agricultural work on which their livelihoods depended. Thus, in April 1919, the prefect of the Somme was obliged to warn mayors through out the red zone that farm labourers (paid per hectare) had been destroying British and French burial sites which lay in the fields ascribed to them. Farmers whose land contained field graves were requested to declare this straight away to their mayor, and warned of their legal obligation to safeguard the bodies of the war dead.[82] The warning was repeated again in July 1919, when STPU workers destroyed burial plots on farms in Bouchavesnes and Sailly Saillisel.On this occasion, the prefect demanded an inquest into the desecration and the punishment of the culprits. Imperial War Graves Commission workers (whose principal role was to resurrect the identity of the war dead), faced similar accusations in 1919. Denounced by a councillor in Foucaucourt (Pas-de-Calais) for 'digging up French soldiers, breaking in to their coffins, searching and then disposing of their bodies' the accusation was however, strenuously denied.[83] German burial sites may have been particularly vulnerable. Though the mayor and the local magistrate in the village of Puzeaux had opposed the creation of a German military cemetery (a wartime burial pit located in the ruins of the old village cemetery contained the bodies of 25 German soldiers) , they nonetheless attempted to prevent their exhumation and relocation elsewhere. With the ruined cemetery on the verge of being levelled in 1924 (local families had been permitted 5 years to undertake the transfer of their dead to a new cemetery), their intention appeared to be an act

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[82] ADS.99R3732, Service des Tombes Militaires, prefect to all mayors, April 1919.
[83] ADS.99R3732, Service des Tombes Militaires, General Philipot to the prefect, August 1919.

of wholesale desecration. Fulfilling its obligation to protect the memorial sites for all war dead (article 225 of the Treaty of Versailles) the Ministry for War was forced to intervene.[84]

Few who regularly worked in the fields of the red zone, scavenged in its trenches or (in the case of children) discovered in the battlefields an exciting post-war playground, would have been spared the sight of the dead of the Great War. The psychological impact of an encounter with the dead, cannot be easily dismissed from issues of post-war remembrance. Neither can the unpalatable local knowledge that the dead of the Great War lay vulnerable to the plough, nor the omnipresent fear that the weaponry littering the fields had not ceased to claim the last of its victims.[85] Historians who have delved in to the complexities of post-war memory, frequently draw attention to the 'conspiracy of silence' which shrouded soldiers who returned to their homes across Europe after the Great War.[86] Modris Eksteins and Samuel Hynes both point towards the crucial period of ten post-war years which elapsed, before tongues were loosened and attempts were made to 'communicate the incommunicable.'[87] Clearly, the 'hushed taboos' which governed the public memories of veterans, and the constraints which red zone communities placed upon their own acts of commemoration are worthy of comparison.[88] *Silence*, for the men who had fought in the Great War often reflected their liminal experiences of post-war life. [89] With the disappearance of battlefield filth from their physical environment, they found themselves caught in a psychological wasteland between

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[84] ADS.5Z61, Puzeaux, affaires communales, Ministry of War to the prefect.

[85] Antoine Prost has described the psychological impact in the following terms. 'Discovering a body was unforgettable. It left men changed; (it was) impossible to continue as though the encounter had not taken place.' See Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la societé française 1914-39,* Volume 3, p.7.

[86] Modris Eksteins, "All Quiet on the Western Front and the Fate of a War" in *Journal of Contemporary History,* 15 (1980), p.345.

[87] Hynes, *A War Imagined,* p.424.

[88] Ibid., p.423.

[89] Leed, *No Man's Land,* pp.212-213.

the worlds of private and public memory. Unable to reshape memories which had so fundamentally traversed the frontiers of language, via the linguistic formulas which were offered by memorials, they retreated in to silence. Returnees to the more isolated regions of the Somme's ruined countryside likewise encountered a world which imposed an oppressive sense of liminality; France's *via sacra* was also a sterile red zone; a landscape in which pristine cemeteries and monuments coexisted with the rotting corpses from the war; a place where the memory of loss was complicated by a continued toll of death and crippling injury. In some extreme cases it was not until the mid 1930s, when red brick town halls, churches and homes dominated the landscape of the old battlefields, that meaningful civic dialogue began and thoughts were drawn towards a safe, and definitive form of memorialisation. In villages such as Beaucourt-sur-Ancre and Auchonvillers, deliberations on memorials took place some 4/5 years after the inauguration ceremonies which had formally closed the era of reconstruction. As the physical traces of the war gradually receded from the former battlefields, sanitised representations of war finally acquired an ideological foothold, and local war memorials began to appear. In the immediate aftermath of the war, this was not the case. Provisional settlements consisting of tar coated barracks provided little sense of a border from the spectre of the battlefield. Allied to this were the profound fears amongst red zone communities that the financial uncertainties of reconstruction would deny them the homes they had been promised in 1919. As *La Gazette de Péronne* endlessly pointed out to its readers during the bleak year of 1921, clearly defined concepts of victory and defeat remained an ideological luxury. Extreme though the view may have been, it contained an essential truth. Without the bricks and mortar of reconstruction to add tangible meaning to the rhetoric of victory, the process of forgetting could not truly begin:

It is not the Boche, as we like to think; it is certainly not the Frenchmen of the centre, the Midi and the west, who for much of the war profited from it; nor is it the occupied regions of France which were not destroyed, nor places such as Paris, Dunkerque, Rouen, Amiens and other towns which received just a few bombs dropped by planes or a few shells sent by Bertha...the true vanquished of the war are those from the line of fire, where everything was destroyed and where today, everything remains in the same state of desolation.[90]

[90]ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 3 September 1921.

CHAPTER FIVE

'IF YOU WANT A WAR, YOU SHALL HAVE A WAR': POLITICS IN THE SOCIAL PHASE, 1919-1925

> Deputy Raudot: "Gentlemen...according to the proposal of the law on which you have voted and the articles which have been adopted, the state is obliged to provide war damages. But if you don't fix the sum, the state will not know the amount which it will have to pay. The sword of Damocles will therefore be left hanging over the treasury."
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> Deputy Lefranc: "Let us behave as one does, when instead of being obliged to pay a debt, one fulfils the act of fraternity, the act of the head of the family, a father who takes account of the misfortune which has befallen his children and does what he must to protect the rest."[1]

Wholly unparalleled though the *bilan de guerre* from the Western Front of 1914-1918 undoubtedly was, the laws which shaped the post-war reconstruction of France were rooted in historical precedents and long-standing republican traditions. Prior to the formulation of the April 1919 *Charte des sinistrés*, 8 separate laws on war damages (the first of them in 1791, the last in 1885) had been passed by the National Assembly. All but one had been the birth-child of a republican regime; half of them had been debated by politicians serving the Third Republic. As well as responding to the localised social and economic issues thrown up in the aftermath of warfare, these shifts in the legal framework of war reparations mirrored

[1] ADS.2K162, *Journal Officiel*, 7 September 1871. No reference was made to the political affiliation of the said deputies.

the progressive redefinition and extension of the state's social responsibilities, which had taken place in the second half of the nineteenth century. Viewed from this perspective, the Great War's *sinistrés* appear at once as the unfortunate victims of the twentieth century's first industrialised conflict, and the principal beneficiaries of a long-term process of legal and social change. The rights they acquired from the state in 1919, the immense financial obligations to which the state harnessed itself, and indeed the system of values to which both were tied, had been marked by more than a century of war, devastation and post-war soul-searching.

In assessing the principles upon which the Third Republic proposed to rebuild northern France in 1914-18, parallels may be drawn from the war which preceded it. It was during the final throes of a debate in September 1871, that deputy Raudot (quoted above) urged the chamber of deputies to consider the implications of marrying the new republic to an ideal of unconstrained post-war reconstruction. His reference to the 'sword of Damocles' which was left hanging over the treasury, may have fixed the attention of fellow deputies upon the financial costs of reconstruction in 31 devastated departments, but Raudot's concerns are likely to have been more far-reaching. Implicit in his speech was a warning to the chamber against erring so radically from the principles of liberalism; a plea to halt the inexorable blurring of distinctions between the responsibilities of the state and those of the private individual. Raudot's appeal for restraint fell upon stone-hard ground. Rejecting his amendments, a law was proposed which promised *cash* payments to all *sinistrés* to match the scale of their personal losses; it was passed by 605 votes to 4.[2] Far from being a a mere 'act of grace' or 'favour' to the *sinistrés* of the Franco-Prussian war, the reconstruction law of

[2] ADS.2K162, *Journal Officiel,* 7 September 1871.

September 1871 was a significant landmark in the evolution of the paternalistic state.[3] Financially onerous though the burden of reconstruction may have been, the political stakes for which the chamber was playing were high. In the poisonous aftermath of defeat, occupation and civil war, deputy Lefranc's employment of a family metaphor to define the relationship between *le pays réel* and *le pays légal* was a fitting appraisal of republican ambition. Imagining the state at the head of a national family implied that the nation's common identity was tied to that of its republican patriarch. The act of reconstruction, loaded as it was with the cathartic symbolism of national unity and psychological healing, provided the new regime with the golden opportunity of tangibly demonstrating the benefits of its paternalism and broadening the ideological appeal of the metaphor.

Certain echoes of 1871 may be found in the solemn promises made to the French nation in October 1914, by the Republic's prime minister, René Viviani. By the outbreak of the Great War, the Third Republic was 44 years old, but its leaders remained ceaselessly conscious of the fragility of the alliances binding the body politic.[4] The *union sacrée* itself had been established on the eve of the general mobilisation and was something of an improvised marriage between the state, Socialists belonging to the SFIO (the second largest party in the chamber of deputies) and unionists of the CGT; a political truce founded as much upon the hasty suspension of the infamous *carnet B* as a shared patriotic ideal.[5] Its durability was yet to be tested. This makes the timing of Viviani's announcement all the more significant. The pledge to fund the rebuilding of France when hostilities with the Germans ended, was

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[3] Clout, *After the Ruins*, p.175

[4] Judith Stone, "The Republican Brotherhood: Gender and Ideology" in E.A.Accampo, Rachel.G.Fuchs and Mary Lynn Stewart (eds.), *Gender and the Politics of Social Reform in France, 1870-1914* (London, 1995), p.44.

[5] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, pp.3-4.

delivered in the wake of the 'miracle' of the Marne, the bombardment of Rheims cathedral, and amidst the first revelations of the atrocities committed against civilians in Belgium and northern France. Each of these issues had mobilised a new extreme of ideological warfare, infusing collective perceptions of the conflict with a quasi-religous fervour. The act of financing post-war reconstruction may well have presented itself as something of a historical obligation to the state in October 1914, but the political psychology behind Viviani's decision to mobilise this singularly Republican panacea, is self evident.

Less evident in 1914, was the scale of the undertaking to which the French state was committing itself. Bimonthly reports filed to the Ministry of the Interior from northern France's military zones furnished plentiful statistical evidence as to the nature and scale of the devastation, but the destructive capacity of industrialised warfare had not yet been revealed in its totality. Albert for example, was described in one such report (in October 1914) as being in a 'pitiful condition,' but by August 1918, the town barely possessed a discernible physical form. Across the eastern region of the Somme as a whole, the trail of mass devastation had of course been repeated; the German bombardments of 1915-16, the massive artillery battle of July-November 1916, the scorched earth policy employed during the 'genial' retreat of March 1917 and the Spring Offensive of the following year, would each contribute to a *bilan de guerre* which dwarfed all of its precedents. When prefects across the ten devastated departments addressed their mayors in the aftermath of the war, the statistical evidence underpinning apocalyptic literary images of the Western Front became clear: 11,000 public buildings had been destroyed, as had 800,000 dwellings; 62000 km of roadways, 5,000 km of railways, 1,858 km of canals all needed to be rebuilt; 350,000

hectares of farmland awaited restoration. The global cost was estimated at 34 billion French francs in gold. This was 7 times higher than the annual state budget of 1913.[6]

By pledging itself in 1914 to the principle of 'equality and solidarity of all Frenchmen under the burden of war damages' with no clear perception of scale, the state was clearly taking an enormous political risk.[7] The commitments made in October 1914 place deputy Raudot's reference to the 'sword of Damocles' in a radically different perspective. Then in 1871, the Third Republic's politicians had been afforded the luxury of debating in the *aftermath* of a conflict when the *bilan de guerre* of all but 1 of the 31 devastated departments had been estimated by their prefects.[8] In 1914, this was not the case. Uncertainty reigned; *ils paieront*, the knee-jerk war-cry of the Radicals was its most obvious political consequence. Entering the national psyche as an article of faith, *ils paieront* was the 'critical assumption' upon which reconstruction was perceived to depend. By December of 1914 it had been committed to the statute books as the state made its first formal demand for war damage payments from Germany.[9] As much as it served to proclaim the belligerence of a partially occupied nation however, *ils paieront* served to underline the French state's military and ideological dilemma. For the total reconstruction of devastated France to be economically feasible, victory would have to be absolute. In effect, the 'sword of Damocles' had been placed not merely over the treasury in 1914, but over the social, economic and psychological mechanisms of a nation engaged in total war.[10] For the socialist politicians who withdrew

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[6] Jean-Jacques Becker, "Les destructions de la guerre de 1914-18" in Jean Favier (ed.), *Reconstructions et modernisations: La France après les ruines 1918...1945...* (Paris, 1991), p.22.

[7] This pledge would form article 1 of the law of 17 April 1919.

[8] ADS.2K162, *Journal Officiel,* 7 September 1871. The department of Seine-et-Oise had not established its *bilan de guerre* by the time the law was debated in the chamber.

[9] Clout, *After the Ruins*, p.176

[10] Both Britain and France, argues Dan. P. Silverman, deferred the question of war costs 'until the conclusion of the war. This tactic which may appear irresponsible in retrospect,

from the *union sacrée* in 1917, and sympathetic writers such as Michel Corday, the rabid attachment to *jusqu'auboutisme* engendered by this single issue of reparations, revealed flaws both in the political logic of the conflict and the morality of bourgeois paternalism. To Corday, the irresistible momentum towards mass devastation, national bankruptcy and demographic disaster in 1914-18, had stripped all sense of meaning from the war, save the ludicrously contradictory principle which perpetuated it: 'pour avoir des réparations' wrote Corday, 'on fait de l'irréparable.'[11]

Amidst the euphoria of November 1918, Corday's observation possessed little of the searing resonance it later acquired; nor indeed at the closure of the Treaty of Versailles seven months later, when the issue of reparations appeared to have been settled. But this brutal questioning of the Great War's essential meaning is worth considering, for it would encapsulate the relationship between each of Western Front's *sinistrés* and the state at various stages of the reconstruction period. If in the aftermath of the collapse of the *union sacrée*, the political credibility of the Republic revolved around the question of reparations, its moral credibility likewise hung upon the issue of reconstruction. Between 1920-25, when the illusory nature of *ils paieront* was exposed, the credits from the Ministry for the Liberated Regions dried up and work sites across the devastated regions ground to a halt, both would be sorely tested.

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resulted from the general belief in 1914 that the war would be short, and later from the assumption that the Germans would pay their share...In any event, French leaders equated 'sound finance' with defeat. France had to survive, no matter what the price.'
Dan.P.Silverman, *Reconstructing Europe after the Great War*, (London, 1982), p.15.

[11] Corday, '*L'envers de la guerre*, p.136.

Defining Reconstruction

Approaching the issue of post-war reconstruction, we encounter significant conceptual problems. Is our aim merely to recount *how* the rebuilding of northern France was achieved; to establish where the finance ultimately came from, and the number of years this vast project took to accomplish? Or is there a more fundamental issue at stake? Rather than fixing attention on the 'how' of reconstruction, ought we not ask ourselves *what*, in the aftermath of an unprecedented act of human and physical devastation, was truly being rebuilt? For if reconstruction is to be defined solely by the physical fabric of towns and villages across the Western Front, what can be learnt about the rebuilding of the social identities of communities which had been progressively shattered by mobilisation, evacuation, mass death and devastation? Clearly, the physical and social aspects of reconstruction are inextricably tied, but in answering questions about the former, we do not necessarily address the latter with any degree of conviction. Too often the subtlety of their interplay has been overlooked by the writers and historians who have made the aftermath of war their academic battlefield. Significant works on reconstruction (such as Jean Favier's *Reconstructions et modernisations*) have furnished the crucial statistical data through which the scale of reconstruction in the aftermath of both world wars may be understood, but the cultural meaning of reconstruction remains as remote and inaccessible as ever, somehow hidden from view. As with mass war-death itself, the act of neatly quantifying tragedy through the bureaucratic formula of a statistical table, often disguises far more than it reveals.

By drawing attention away from the endless statistical presentations of rebuilt roads and railroads, bridges, houses and factories, we are by necessity perhaps, turning away from the Western Front itself. Unique though the physical features of the devastated departments may

have been, many of the social aspects of their reconstruction were not; instead they reflected the collective 'search for post-war normalcy' which was taking place throughout the interior of France and indeed across much of Europe.[12] We may for example, choose to define reconstruction in this sense as the rebuilding of governmental credibility. In peace, no less than in a time of 'total' war, the state had to undergo a rapid metamorphosis. Georges Clemenceau's belief that peace might prove more difficult to win than the Great War itself indicated that a nation bruised by an unprecedented level of blood-tax, would not be easily convinced that such a metamorphosis was at all possible.[13] Clemenceau's own transition from the draconian executive of a 'total' war machine ('no more pacifist campaigns, no more German intrigues, no treason, no semi-treason. Just war, war and nothing but war'[14]) to the embodiment of a political *bon père de famille* ideal ('les poilus ont les droits sur nous'[15]) reflected the ideological distance that post-war governments throughout Europe were obliged to travel. In France, the state's desire to bind French society together by taking the patriarchal lead in repaying the nation's *dette morale* would be made explicit in article one of the *Charte des sinistrés.*[16] But it was nonetheless apparent across a range of post-war social legislation. The passage of the law limiting the working week to 40 hours (passed in the run up to the 1919 legislative elections), the extension of pension rights to *poilus* and *mutilés,*[17] employment laws guaranteeing privileges for demobilised soldiers, war widows and orphans, were each marked by the politics of state paternalism. So too in post-war Britain. The motives behind the decision of the Lloyd George administration to extend the franchise to

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[12] Margaret Higonnet and Patrice Higonnet, "The Double Helix" in Margaret Higonnet and Jane Jenson (eds.), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, (London, 1987), p.32
[13] Martin Kitchen, *Europe Between the Wars: a Political History* (London, 1988), p.204
[14] B.Waites, *Total War and Social Change* (London, 2000) p.37
[15] Clemenceau's post-war dictum appeared underneath the title of *Le Poilu Picard*, a journal for the Somme's *ancien combattants.*
[16] Article 1 promised 'The equality and solidarity of Frenchmen under the burden of war damages.'
[17] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, pp.IX-XVIII.

women over 30 may still be an area of contentious historical debate, but in less gender-specific legislation (such as the Addison act of 1919, providing 250,000 'homes for heroes' and the unemployment insurance act of 1920), the state's acknowledgement of its moral debt was being made unequivocally clear.[18]

In what other ways should this notion of 'reconstruction' be construed? Feminist historians have argued for more than two decades that the aftermath of the Great War was defined both socially and politically by the rebuilding of patriarchal authority; the reappearance of demobilised men providing the dynamic for a 'mysogynistic backlash' against the social gains acquired by women under the condition of 'total' war.[19] 'Did millions of veterans return from the front having thrown off their traditional prejudices?' Asks Steven Hause, 'Could any society with deeply ingrained feelings about the nature of the family and women's positions within it suddenly embrace the concept of the autonomous, emancipated woman?'[20] Whether this framework of gender subordination can be wholly applied to the red zones of the Western Front is perhaps contentious. Return to these regions inverted the dichotomy between *front* and *arrière*: it was not uniquely the act of the soldier-hero, the demobilised *poilu*, but included civilians of all ages and both sexes; no formal celebrations (such as the *fêtes de retour* organised for *poilus* throughout France) marked this haphazard process; poverty and marginality were its driving forces, rather than victory and its powerful endorsement of masculine prowess. Nor could the re-gendering of civilian space be so neatly conceptualised via the *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* ideology which feminists present as an all-pervasive feature of Europe in the aftermath of war.[21] In the early months of peace, the

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[18] Martin Kitchen, *Europe between the Wars: a Political History*, pp.186-7.
[19] Higonnet, "The Double Helix" p.42.
[20] Steven Hause, "More Minerva than Mars: The French Women's Rights Campaign and the First World War" in *Behind the Lines*, p.102.
[21] Susan Kingsley Kent, "The Politics of Sexual Difference: World War One and the Demise

red zone towns consisted of little more than clusters of nissen huts. The absence of a pre-war physical infrastructure thus draws attention to a radically altered cultural terrain: the absolute dependence of *all* returnees (regardless of age, sex or military uniform) upon the paternal largesse of the state may not have negated gender issues altogether, but it seems plausible that their sharper edges were blunted by the ruins of the Somme. Only when Albert's post-war township ceased to be wholly provisional in form, did the politics of gender subordination clearly manifest itself once more.

The specific meanings we attach to the process of return *to* the red zone, (as opposed to the act of returning home *from* the front) have other implications upon the study of the Somme in the reconstruction period. Though the red zone press remained slavishly loyal to the device of imagining a single community of *sinistrés* bound together by their unique suffering, it is clear that *sinistré* identity had little of the affirmative power which perpetuated the bonds of brotherhood amongst the demobilised *poilus*. To be a *sinistré* was to be a victim, a member of a homeless mass awaiting financial, material and physical help from the state. Imagining *sinistrés* perched with their *poilu* comrades on the moral summit of post-war France may have served a useful political purpose to the red zone's journals, but the *sinistré* label was one that all returnees were singularly keen to dispense with. Reconstruction would expose the fault-lines in this socially disparate collective group as relentlessly as the Great War had exposed the brittle fabric of patriotism; it would create a bureaucratic nightmare in understaffed *mairies* across the ruins; it would exacerbate financial crises on a national and international level; it would encourage a culture of exaggeration, denunciation and recrimination. Reconstruction was above all a highly individualistic affair; whereas acts of self-sacrifice had assumed symbolic value as the apotheosis of patriotic behaviour in

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of British Feminism' *Journal of British Studies*, 27, p.239

1914-18, the rebuilding process legitimised a return to a pre-war paradigm, in which the pursuit of self interest was construed as ultimately serving the common good. Those who had been vilified as profiteers for their self-serving behaviour, by a nation at war, were thus viewed by the state as the key players in the nation's economic revival.[22] As such, it is woefully insufficient to view the post-war rebuilding of France via a procession of statistics, each of them demonstrating how a mass of *sinistrés* became *propriétaires*; in reconstruction we must also explore how pre-war social structures defined by class, profession and property ownership (the bastions of identity in the bourgeois Third Republic[23]) prevailed over the moral identities of *poilus*, *indéracinables* and loyal tillers of the ancestral soil, in shaping the communities of post-war northern France.

To begin, we may look at the function and structure of the red zones' evaluation commissions. Upon these bodies rested much of the responsibility for dividing the state's war-chest and mapping the social contours of a future reconstruction. Evaluation commissions had a prehistory; they were established at village level after the Franco-Prussian war, and had been used then as the principal tool of war damage allocation. The structural flaws which emerged in this period of reconstruction doubtlessly influenced the war damage laws of 1914-18. By the terms of the September 1871 law, entire municipal councils had presided over these bodies; as such, the process of war damage evaluation had acquired an unequivocally political flavour, as village and town commissions attempted to court popularity with their local electorate. The fruits of their labour (as political canvassers rather than war damage experts) were far from pleasing for the Ministry of Finance. In Péronne, 902

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[22] Jean Louis Robert, "The Image of the Profiteer" in Jay Winter and Jean Louis Robert (eds.), *Capital Cities at War*, pp.104-133.
[23] N. Greene, *From Versailles to Vichy: the Third French Republic, 1919-1940*, (Illinois, 1970), pp.4-11.

sinistrés had made demands for war indemnities, their *claimed* losses totalling 4,379,927 francs. This was granted in its totality by the Péronne evaluation commission. The pattern would be repeated throughout the canton where only 3 out of 20 village commissions were prepared to question the validity of *any* of the demands made by their *sinistrés* and reduce the size of their claim.[24] In Albert's canton a marginally greater degree of rigour is in evidence. Here, commissions in 9 communes (out of 26) contended the legitimacy of the claims made by locals and reduced the amount of their awards. Nonetheless, the claims of at least 972 *sinistrés* across 13 villages had been accepted at face value.[25] Local political pressures, combined perhaps with pressure from Paris to resolve the issue of evaluation at considerable speed (most commissions in the Somme had completed their evaluations within 2 months) appeared to confirm deputy Raudot's fears over the new republic's unfettered act of generosity. The 1919 *Charte des sinistrés* attempted to resolve this issue by centralising the evaluation commissions and paying greater attention to the selection of the people involved with them. Evaluation commissions were to be established on a cantonal, rather a communal level, thus withdrawing the shadow of local village politics from war damage calculations, albeit by a matter of degrees. Councillors also lost the automatic right to serve on the commissions; their places were instead taken by experts in various spheres of reconstruction and evaluation. Finally, the number of people involved in the process of evaluation was streamlined. Commissions in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war had frequently consisted of over 20 members; in 1914-18, the state reduced the number of positions to just 5.[26]

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[24] ADS.99R3683, Canton de Péronne, requisitions et dommages. In one of the villages (Bussu) the total amount claimed by local sinistrés was reduced by just 18 francs, from 63,729 to 63,711.

[25] A.D.Somme, 99R3667, Canton d'Albert, requistions et dommages. Commissions in four of Albert's villages in 1871 recorded no individual claims of war damage.

[26] The law of 6 September 1871 required 50% of the personnel serving on each commission to be local councillors, 50% to be experts in reconstruction and damage evaluation.

The state's desire for war damage evaluation to acquire a more technical and less political flavour was counterbalanced by the need to employ people with a local knowledge of the *sinistrés* themselves. As such, the commissions of 1919 could hardly be deemed to be either politically neutral or socially unattached from those whose claims they were judging. Albert's first commission (3 separate commissions were established due to the number of *sinistrés* in the canton) illustrates this point. Nominated by the prefect to the position of president, was M.Richard, the *greffier* in the local court. Henri Quelin, the owner of a local building firm fulfilled the designated position of *entrepreneur* on the commission. Emile Arrachart, a councillor, entrepreneur and local property owner, and Victor Bombart one of the town's solicitors, shared the post of specialist in the evaluation of furniture and interior furnishings. The logic behind Bombart's selection for this position is clear from the nature of his own war damage claim: his home had contained an impressive collection of Louis XV furnishings before they disappeared with the British army in 1918. M.Picard and Francois Boulanger (both of them councillors and shopkeepers) likewise shared the role of providing expertise on commercial war damage claims. The fifth position on the commission was taken by a delegate from the Ministry for the Liberated Regions. A further two experts were also enrolled in order to address reconstruction issues specific to Albert's rural canton.[27] Evaluations of the cost of restoring the canton's forests and lakes were undertaken by M.Guart; George Gonse was assigned the role of overseeing damage claims filed by farmers. Both were inhabitants of villages within the canton.[28]

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[27] ADS.2K361, *Journal Officiel*, 18 April 1919. Article 22 of the law allowed for extra experts to sit upon the commission owing to the distinct features of a war-torn zone. In Albert's canton, the evaluation of destroyed forests, lakes and farmland required additional personnel.

[28] ADS.10R25, Dommages de guerre d'Albert, cantonal commission report, 15 July 1919.

-Thus, of the commission members mentioned here, three were members of Abel Pifre's council. In the November 1919 elections they had stood alongside their future mayor as the *Union de la Reconstitution* (a right wing alliance of conservative-minded industrialists and Catholics) against Radicals led by the incumbent Emile Leturcq. Pifre himself had a long-standing political profile in the canton. Elected as mayor of Aveluy prior to the Great War, Pifre had contested the Péronne arrondissement in the legislative elections of 1914. Promoting his candidature as a conservative republican, Pifre had avoided all forms of party affiliation, but actively sought the support of local Catholics and dissident Radicals. Though his republican loyalties were not palatable to the Catholic community as a whole, enmity with the anticlerical Leturcq was sufficiently credible to sustain a loose alliance. In the aftermath of the war, his political association with the Catholic electorate paid richer dividends. In removing Leturcq by 729 votes to 287, Pifre's success mirrored a national voting trend, which in the legislative elections of that year had brought the *Bloc National* to power, and had filled the *bleu-horizon* chamber of 1919 with the largest right wing presence since 1875, and an unprecedented number of practising Catholics.[29] Echoing the post-war calls of the right for the nation's *union sacrée* to endure in the aftermath of victory, Pifre had likewise demanded that returnees to the provisional town commit themselves to their common identity as *Albertins* and as *sinistrés* in order to transcend the complexities of reconstruction. As such, attempts from the left to politicise Albert's reconstruction were construed to be a corrosive influence upon a community bound by the equality of its suffering. Pifre's newspaper *L'Avenir d'Albert* mocked Leturcq's hostility towards his candidature as incongruous with the ideals of a peacetime community ('as soon as he heard...he entered in to a violent rage and offered the following threat: 'If you want a war,

[29] Kitchen, *Europe Between the Wars,* p.212.

you shall have a war!') and warned Albert's electorate of the dangers inherent in returning to the political divisions of the pre-war era:

> Dear *Albertins*, we have been separated from each other by the cruel torment which has destroyed our region in these the last years, but we have remained united by a common thought: that of our *petite patrie*. There is not one amongst us who, in exile, or wherever the war has taken him has not evoked the memory of our good town of Albert, once so radiant, so prosperous, where we lived in harmony and whose calm was only ever shaken by political battles...
> Today...our motto is No Politics! Others have believed that it is necessary to resurrect old quarrels, in order to create for themselves an electoral springboard. This is not our way of thinking. We think, along with the prefect of the Somme, that when one's home has been destroyed, it is not the time to begin squabbling over its ruins. Divisions can only engender inertia and disorder and we refuse to cast such seeds amongst the *Albertins*.[30]

The demand made here, that the disaster of war ought to be seen as a credible basis for post-war political harmony, had acquired an ideological permanence in the political discourse of 1914-18. As such, it is unsurprising that it continued to carry considerable weight in its aftermath; indeed, Pifre's electoral success was proof-positive that the *union sacrée* ideal was still very much alive. This was the triumph of a catholic sympathiser and *froussard* (Pifre had been sacked from his mayoral post in Aveluy on October 1914 following an early flight from the war zone) over an anticlerical *indéracinable*. The symbolic importance of the victory is hard to ignore: in endorsing Pifre over Leturcq, Albert's voters were collectively turning their backs on the very divisions which had sustained their identities throughout the war years. Reconstruction in this 'emergency' post-war phase remained a distant future prospect, defined by the *Charte des sinistrés* and loaded with the promise of social catharsis. The collective aspirations invested in this event appeared to have marginalised bitter memories of Albert's political past. Could this endure? We are returning perhaps to the conceptual problem of defining what was being rebuilt in Albert. Was

[30] BCA.45.356, *L'Avenir d'Albert*, December 1919.

reconstruction merely about homes, public squares, churches and schools? Clearly these were the tangible symbols of rebirth around which the community invested its conception of the future, but the community itself was likewise experiencing its own post-war reconstruction, as issues of class, gender, patriarchal authority and political identity acquired an ever stronger role in moulding the fabric of daily life. The complex interplay of these disparate dimensions would ultimately render the notion of a durable *union sacrée* a distant wartime illusion.

At the fulcrum of this process lay the cantonal commission with its network of political and social ties to the council. Given the powers that this body -and indeed, its fellow commissions throughout the red zone- wielded over the lives of each *sinistré*, it is unsurprising that a culture of vilification was engendered almost from the moment it commenced its operations. The inevitable mouthpiece of *sinistré* invective was the red zone press. Alongside the Ministry for the Liberated Regions and the interior departments of *la France épargnée,* the commissions emerged as the embodiment of bourgeois parsimony; the amoral 'other' through which *sinistré* suffering acquired its sharpest definitions. To *La Gazette de Péronne,* those who had acquired the power of judging their fellow *sinistrés* were nothing short of 'assassins' who treated *the Great War's victims* as common thieves before a high court judge. 'We shouldn't be confusing the victims with the criminals,' it concluded.[31] In *La Voix des Ruines*, the same bodies were described as 'arbitrary monsters' whose penny-pinching was directed at the most vulnerable and often the most deserving of patriots. An imagined dialogue between one such *sinistré* and the evaluation commission, went as follows:

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[31] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne*, November 1920.

President (of the commission): Please, sit down. Let's see, I've looked at your dossier. There don't seem to be any exaggerations.
Sinistré: Thank you. I can assure you that my war damage claim was made in the utmost sincerity.
President: Let us begin. First category: German occupation of your house. Did you live in this house before the war?
Sinistré: Yes sir.
President: And during the invasion?
Sinistré: I was mobilised and my family were refugees in free France.
President: Then you shall receive no indemnity!
Sinistré: But why?
President: Please. Reserve your questions for later... Let us look at the second category. Mattresses. Five mattresses at 110 francs? That *is* expensive!...[32]

Criticisms were not limited to the red zone press. They emanated with equal force from the *sinistrés* themselves, and local politicians who had been denied a role in the evaluation process. Mayors from distant red zone villages expressed concern that the evaluation commissions (with their predominance of personnel drawn from the cantonal *chef-lieu*) were poorly placed to make evaluations in communes where barely a trace of brickwork remained visible. One such mayor called for a radical democratisation of the system. An elected commission drawn from each village could preside over the process. One month prior to their judgement, the dossiers of each villager would be displayed in the local town hall so that a public scrutiny could be undertaken by their neighbours. This way, the commissions would be provided with information on exaggerations and abuses.[33] The proposal that denunciation (rife as it already was) ought to be formally endorsed and recognised as a structural element of the evaluation process, met with an inevitable rejection. It seems likely that the mayor was merely expressing frustration at his own exclusion from the inner-circle of the commission; the 'arbitrary monsters' constructed in red zone journalese were at the same time local individuals with whom all *sinistrés* desired to establish influential bonds. The legal equality of all *sinistrés* may have been enshrined in the *Charte des sinistrés*, but it appears to have

[32] ADS.265PER1, *La Voix des Ruines*, 7 July 1921.
[33] ADS.241PER2, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 5 September 1920

been universally acknowledged that social ties, business links and political alliances would ultimately prevail in deciding the outcomes of the evaluation process.

Where then might we find clues that this was so; that an *informal* reconstruction of political bonds was shaping the *formal* reconstruction of houses and factories? Surprisingly little evidence can be gleaned from examining the order in which war damage dossiers were evaluated. Unlike its predecessor of 1871-2 which had completed its work within 2 months of its creation, Albert's evaluation commission moved at a tortuous pace. Equipped with catalogues from the local chamber of commerce which listed pre-war and post-war prices on all conceivable items from silk handkerchiefs to violin strings,[34] the commission *claimed* to take an average of 3 hours to scrutinise each dossier.[35] By April 1921, it was faced with a backlog of over 12,000 unseen dossiers and endless complaints from *sinistrés* who had been waiting for over two years for an evaluation of their losses.[36] The mountainous paperwork created by the devastation of 1914-18 had nurtured only bureaucratic chaos in regions where *fonctionnaires* were often slow to return to their posts; until 1921 when the state began to take on a more direct role in 'ordering' the process of evaluation, this seems to have operated in a strangely democratic manner.Amongst the first *sinistrés* to have their damage claims evaluated by Albert's commission, we find a postman, a carpenter, an employee of the *Chemin de Fer Économique,* a hairdresser, a property owner, a factory *concierge* and a number of factory workers.[37] No evidence exists to suggest that an *informal* system of

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[34] ADS.10R25, Dommages de guerre d'Albert

[35] ADS.10R26, Dommages de guerre d'Albert. The claim was made by Henri Quelin, who sat on the town's first evaluation commission. It seems likely however, that some dossiers received less scrutiny than others.

[36] ADS.KZ2864, Conseil Général, May 1921.

[37] ADS.10R25, Dommages de guerre d'Albert. Affaires Solutionnées, September 1919.

favouritism determined the place of a *sinistré* in the queue. Had this not been so, it seems likely that newspapers such as *La Voix des Ruines* and *La Gazette de Péronne* -arch-critics of the local commissions- would have been quick to voice their denunciations.

Nevertheless, by looking more closely at the members of the cantonal commissions themselves and indeed the local men who sat on the municipal council, we are provided with clues as to how informal ties may have left their mark on the reconstruction process. Thus, whilst Albert's evaluation commission went to the extremes of counting the number of tree stumps remaining in Jules Potelle's ruined orchard in order to verify his damage claim[38] (Potelle found himself in a state of post-war poverty, renting a nissen in *Le Village* at the 1 franc per annum rate reserved for the town's poor[39]), and dismissed Jules Cardon's dossier because he had been unable to produce the necessary invoices as proof of privately financed wartime repairs,[40] it was considerably less stringent when dealing with those possessing more audible political voices or more impressive social connections. The dossier of Maurice Arrachart provides one such example of how the influence of social networks may have prevailed in shaping the evaluation process. Arrachart was a pre-war *propriétaire* of considerable wealth, possessing a total of 31 different properties in Albert. He was also well represented, with family connections both on the council and the evaluation commission. In December 1921 his architect (perhaps chosen because he too was a member of the commission) first reported that there was no evidence that four of these houses actually existed. This was later revised to read: 'the state of the premises did not allow for a vigorous verification of their size.'[41] 'Simple presumptions' (in accordance with article 32 of the

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[38] ADS.10R30, Dommages de guerre d'Albert. Dossier Potelle
[39] AMA. Council minutes, 10 September 1923.
[40] ADS.10R45, Dommages de guerre d'Albert. Dossier Cardon.
[41] ADS.10R44, Dommages de guerre d'Albert.

Charte des sinistrés) rather than hard evidence likewise seem to have predominated when the commission dealt with the dossier of Hortense Comte. The ruins of her 9 properties (five of them destroyed in September 1914) were initially inspected by her architect in January 1918; no witness testimonies appear to have been required to validate the subsequent claim. Here, Hortense Comte's reputation as a wealthy benefactrice is likely to have been the decisive factor. Faced with ever growing demands on municipal land in the aftermath of the war, as the provisional town swelled in size, Pifre's council gratefully accepted the free gift of land she owned between the Rue de Bray and the Rue de Péronne. A Rue Emile Comte was named by Abel Pifre, in honour of her late husband in 1923.

Others, whose post-war reputations had been built around political opposition, rather than happy coexistence with Abel Pifre's right wing council were somewhat less well received. Allied with the previous mayor Emile Leturcq, M.Ducellier had been defeated at the municipal elections of 1919. A landowner prior to the war, Ducellier possessed 55 acres of land which were acquired by the council on a compulsory lease for the same purpose as the land presented by Hortense Comte. The owner's opposition to the acquisition of his land was however, as well known as his opposition to the mayor. Consequently, his own evaluation of the rent due to him by the council was dismissed as a deliberate act of exaggeration.[42] Ducellier was by no means alone in discovering an informal financial tariff being placed upon the legitimate act of democratic combat in the aftermath of the war. Georges Cretel had also stood as a member of Leturcq's defeated *Union des Gauches* in the 1919 municipal elections. In March 1920, the evaluation commission (including as it did, several members of Pifre's council) scrutinised his war damage claim and significantly lowered their award. Georges Cretel replied thus to M.Richard, the president of the first commission:

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[42] AMA. Council minutes, 2 may 1921.

> We have returned home extremely distressed by the reduction that has been imposed upon us (by the commission). I am well aware that there are plenty of dishonest people who profit from these circumstances and exaggerated their claims, but you know us, and know that our family has never been involved in anything dishonest. I wish you to know that we are very saddened by the amount which had been fixed by the commission.[43]

The letter is not unlike that which his brother Louis (a prominent anticlerical) was forced to write to the same body. Louis Cretel's claim had been for furniture totalling 21,465 francs. Mirroring the technique of persuasion employed by bereaved *sinistrés* throughout the Somme, Louis Cretel included in his dossier the war record of his entire family. Though he had not fought in the 1914-18, the death of a brother at the front in 1915, the imprisonment of his father by the Germans and eventual death during the bombardment of 1918, and likewise the death of his mother (injured in the same bombardment) were all recorded for the evaluation commission.[44] Albert's commission offered him a lowly 7,155 francs, 66% less than his own evaluation. He responded in the following words:

> I am extremely surprised by your decision. I wish to reaffirm that I have not exaggerated my war damages, as you have claimed. I rented five rooms which were well furnished; I had a comfortable home and repeat that I didn't exaggerate anything. I acted loyally and wish to inform you that I do not accept your contradictions.[45]

Politically informed injustices of this nature have a significant bearing upon any definition of reconstruction. They shed light upon the ill-cohesion of communities attempting to reconcile their disparate political identities, with the ideological appeal of a collective *sinistré* identity. The local men who served on councils and cantonal commissions across the red zone, could

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[43] ADS.10R26, Dommages de guerre d'Albert, letter from Georges Cretel to M.Richard, 28 March 1920.
[44] ADS.10R46, Dommages de guerre d'Albert.
[45] ADS.10R26, Dommages de guerre d'Albert, Louis cretel to the cantonal commission, August 1920.

be said to have embodied this underlying ill-cohesion. The impact of war had brought upon their shoulders an immense burden of social responsibility, but at the same time they had been presented with unforeseen opportunities of settling long-standing political scores. Pifre's own policies towards the *sinistrés* of Albert are wholly illustrative of this. As mayor of Aveluy, he had suffered the public ignominy of being sacked as a *froussard* by the prefect following his abandonment of the commune in 1914. Though he was never attacked directly in Pierre de Laboureyras's wartime work *La ville d'Albert avant et pendant la Guerre 1914-15*, he was one of the town's *absent* industrialists who collectively symbolised countertypical qualities to the loyal *Albertin.* In comparison with the major literary successes of the war, de Laboureyras's contribution may appear largely insignificant and wholly forgettable, but it reads nonetheless as a *Who's Who?* of front-line Albert, a politically engineered form of wartime myth-making, generated by Leturcq and his allies. The meanings underpinning Albert's sole literary contribution to the Great War are unlikely to have been ignored or forgotten by Pifre in the interests of the provisional town's *union sacrée.* Ducellier, Cretel and perhaps others in their political camp appear to have formed inviting targets through which the new mayor could vent a reciprocal political rancour.

Score-settling was however very much part of the political landscape prior to Pifre's electoral triumph in November 1919. His own allies suffered in like manner in the immediate aftermath of the war. In the months before to the municipal elections, Dr.Toussaint made numerous requests for a provisional house in which he could rebuild his medical *cabinet.* Despite the mounting medical problems in Albert's provisional town (particularly outbreaks of typhoid and dysentery) Toussaint's requests to Leturcq were rejected on the grounds that had shown no intention to reside in Albert on a permanent basis.[46] As with the targeting of

[46] ADS.5Z75, Albert, Affaires Communales, Dr.Toussaint to the *sous-préfet* of Péronne, 16

Ducellier and Cretel, the vindictive approach to Toussaint had a wholly political flavour. Toussaint's prominent role in the Pifre camp had effectively negated his rights as an ordinary *sinistré*. As a result of this decision, Toussaint was obliged to reform his medical practise by using the backroom of a local bar. With Pifre's electoral victory of 1919, his own position improved substantially; elected to serve on the *mission spéciale* (a two-man body created to search out cases of fraud and exaggeration amongst the piles of dossiers submitted by the *sinistrés)* his own opportunity for personal and political revenge had been created.[47] Leturcq's formal declaration of 'war' against his political opponents may have appeared inappropriate to the ideologically-conditioned electorate of 1919, but it seems clear that for provincial Radicals, bruised as they were by the marriage of *their* deputies with those of the right in wartime government, the political *appel aux armes* was an integral aspect of political reconstruction;[48] a sentiment that was endorsed by those (on the opposite side of the political spectrum) with an ongoing commitment to the *union sacrée*.

Reconstruction and Gender

'War' manifested itself in other spheres of reconstruction. As well as being weighted towards councillors, professionals and entrepreneurs residing in the canton's *chef-lieu* (rather than its outlying villages), we should note that participation in the cantonal evaluation commissions was an all-male affair. This was not so much a legal stipulation of the *Charte des sinistrés*, as an informal assumption that male prerogative would apply to the management of

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July 1919.

[47] AMA Council minutes, January 1921

[48] Serge Berstein, "The Radical Socialist Party during the First World War", in Patrick Fridenson (ed.), *The French Home Front 1914-18*, (Oxford, 1992), pp.37-52. Berstein argues that participation in the *union sacrée* 'totally deformed' the image of the party, inflicting wounds 'which took many years to heal.'

reconstruction as indeed it did to so many spheres of public, intellectual and political life. By their very nature, these commissions could therefore be said to epitomise the values underpinning a post-war reconstruction of social normalcy. How then, might this have informed the judgements they made upon their fellow *sinistrés*? Clearly the limited geographical scope of this study places certain constraints upon the conclusions we may draw, but the war damage archives of 1919-32 provide fertile ground for speculation nonetheless. Particular attention needs to be paid to the problems encountered by widowed women throughout the canton, when they pressed the commissions for war damage payments. In Albert, the case of Mme Vve. Bomblèd Bossu is particularly illustrative. Following the death of her mother in 1920, Mme Vve. Bomblèd Bossu inherited the ruined fragments of 5 properties in Albert and Péronne. Through their reconstruction, this middle-aged widow doubtlessly envisaged that she would attain a considerable level of financial independence, as a wealthy *propriétaire.* The subsequent evaluation of her properties by the cantonal commission was however, far below the value which had been attached to them by her architect when her damage claim had been drawn up. One of her houses had been valued by an architect at 46,000 francs, but the commission offered only 19,000 francs in war damages; 1,500 francs had been claimed in order to restore the shattered ruins of her family grave, but again, the commission was willing to grant only 750 francs. In total, the financial disparity between the evaluation made by her architect and that of the commission was 92,000 francs. This was equivalent in value to 3 average sized post-war homes, permitting Mme Vve. Bomblèd Bossu to rebuild (and draw income from) from only 2 of the 5 houses she had inherited. The claimant was obliged to take her case to the tribunal in Péronne, where she received a more favourable hearing.[49] Similarly treated by Albert's commission was Mme Vve. Richez Lomon. Concluding that she had deliberately exaggerated

[49] ADS.10R43, Dommages de guerre d'Albert. Dossier Bomblèd-Bossu.

the prices of furniture she had acquired prior to the war 1914, the commission deemed it necessary to take 29% away from the sum total of her compensation.[50]

Archival evidence likewise suggests that women were frequently the victims of a needless bureaucratic pedantry practised by the commissions. Frequently the documentation they deemed indispensable to their work of evaluation had been lost in the ruins or misplaced in transit as the town's itinerant archives shifted wartime homes in Abbeville, Amiens, Rouen and Lyon. Albert's commission gave one *sinistrée* just one week to furnish evidence of the exact date of her divorce from her husband (it had taken place 22 years earlier, in 1898) before she lost her place in the queue. She complained that she had been unable to take the papers with her when she fled from Albert in March 1918. A replacement document supplied by the town hall to her home in exile (Seine et Oise) arrived 10 days too late to allow the evaluation hearing to proceed.[51] In another case, a war damage claim was dismissed in its entirety because of its late arrival at the commission's offices. The prefect was forced to intercede, reminding the commissions that they had no right to refuse financial aid to a *sinistrée* on these grounds.[52]

Whilst it would be plausible to consider the women in some of these cases as victims of bureaucratic inefficiency rather than a specific male agenda, the sheer number of widowed women who were forced to take their chances with the Péronne *Tribunal des dommages de guerre*, following a drastic undervaluation of their losses (its own reputation was such that *La Voix des Ruines* labelled the *Tribunal* as 'a caricature of justice which robs from widows and

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[50] ADS.10R26, Dommages de guerre d'Albert, 1920 report of the cantonal commission.
[51] ADS.10R26, Dommages de guerre d'Albert.
[52] ADS.10R25, Dommages de guerre d'Albert, prefect to the president of the first cantonal commission, 21 March 1921.

orphans.')[53] adds further weight to the notion of physical reconstruction as a convenient extension of the politics of gender subordination. In April 1921 for instance, the *tribunal* received 8 cases from Albert's canton, all of them from widows. Seventeen out of the 22 cases it reassessed in June were also from widows. In October, all seven of the dossiers sent from Albert's commission to Péronne were likewise those of widowed women.[54] The judgements made by the cantonal commissions and the Péronne *Tribunal* would be reflected in the social geography of Albert by the end of the reconstruction period, when the gender politics of the post-war era could be said to have acquired a symbolic fixity through the bricks and mortar of the new town. When in August 1932, Albert celebrated its *fête de la renaissance*, those whose war damage claims had proved insufficient to permit the reconstruction of their homes, remained marginalised in the provisional huts of *Le Village*, on the outskirts of the town. Widows remained a significant presence in the dilapidated barracks of the old provisional town throughout the 1930s. Some opted to purchase their nissens (and the land on which they stood) when all hope of acquiring a brick home had faded; for others, even this modest outlay was beyond their means. Municipal archives tell us that in Rue F of *Le Village*, Vve. Borgy-le-Roque applied for an *emploi reservé* to supplement her meagre war widow's pension in 1935. This was turned down by the council due to the widow's own infirmities. In the same year and on the same street, Vve. Patte, a 71 year old widow whose son had been killed at the front in 1915, was required to pay 84 francs in unpaid rent on her nissen by the municipal tax office. [55]

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[53] ADS.265PER1, *La Voix des Ruines*, 24 September 1921.
[54] A.D.Somme, 10R25, Dommages de guerre d'albert.
[55] A.D.Somme, 5Z77, Albert, affaires communales, Dr.Verrier to the *sous-préfet*, September 1935

What conclusions ought we to draw from these cases? Does the gendering of reconstruction add weight to Margaret Higonnet's contention that the aftermath of the Great War unleashed something of a 'mysoginistic backlash' in post-war France? Archival evidence certainly points us towards this conclusion, but there are certain problems with this notion which need to be outlined. By talking about a 'backlash' are we to assume a binary opposition between wartime freedom and post-war constraint? This is hardly reflective of refugee experience in 1914-18. As we have seen in chapter two, women who were forced to seek refuge in France's interior departments following occupation or devastation, invariably encountered an extreme of both social and economic marginality. Far from uniting civilian France against a single German enemy, the immense economic and psychological strains of 'total' war merely exacerbated the nation's underlying moral anxieties and social divisions, engendering a fixation upon enemies within. An obsession with the 'otherness' of certain women could be said to have been one of the defining psychological traits of the French home front in the Great War. By 1918, impoverished refugee women from the north formed one of the most convenient targets in this construction of 'otherness.' The lowly social status they occupied had been reinforced by the mysoginistic tendency of popular wartime culture (typified by titillating tales of the occupied north in novels designed for a civilian male readership, such as *Nach Paris*), which transformed victims into objects of sexual scandal. Reconstruction, with its ideological fixation upon social order (symbolised by the peasant, the earth and the family) merely continued this dynamic of marginalising women whose social status could no longer be defined by the patriarchal structure of family life. Young widows harnessed with a deeply flawed patriotic status by the end of the war (exemplified by Barbusse's depiction of Madeleine Vandaërt in *Le feu*) or middle-aged and elderly widows with diminished value as maternal figures, may therefore have stated their claims to the evaluation commissions from a position of severe disadvantage. Without the precious weapon of the vote, the status of

these women was low, a factor which encouraged in the politically sensitive commissions, a severity which they may not have wielded so casually against the male electorate. Viewing reconstruction from this perspective, we might perhaps change the terms of our enquiry: instead of considering *why* the evaluation commissions treated widows such as Mme Vve. Bomblèd Bossu so harshly, might we perhaps conclude: *why not*?[56] Committed as the commissions were to a particular vision of social reconstruction, it seems wholly unfeasible that they would have *willingly* guaranteed the financial independence of such women, when there were others in the endless queue for war damages (families of demobilised men for example) who exerted a far stronger ideological appeal.

If the mysoginistic undertones of the cases highlighted here, suggest that the evaluation commissions frequently overstepped the legal parameters of their mandate, then specific attention needs to be paid to the terms of the *Charte des sinistrés*. In the aftermath of a war which had provoked an unprecedented displacement of civilian populations as well as removing entire towns and villages from the physical landscape of northern France, it was evident that few *sinistrés* would be able to substantiate their war damage claims with hard evidence. As a result, the *Charte des sinistrés* was deliberately vague in outlining the means by which evaluation commissions were to reach their decisions. Article 32 of the law simply stated that 'All means of proof, even by simple presumption would be acceptable in establishing the size (of a claim) by the terms of the present law. Family members and employees could be called upon as witnesses.'[57] Whether it was made explicit or not, the

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[56] The method of enquiry is borrowed from Paul. W. Schroeder. See "World War One as Galloping Gertie: a Reply to Joachim Remak" in H.W.Koch (ed.), *The Origins of the First World War: Great Power Rivalry and German War Aims* (London, 1984), p.104.
[57] ADS.2K361, *Journal Officiel*, 18 April 1919.

formal endorsement of 'simple presumptions' as a legitimate method of evaluation, appeared to permit the commissions a free reign in fusing their evaluation of war damages with an evaluation of the social standing of each *sinistré*. Amongst many *sinistrés*, this appears to have engendered a desperation to *formally* establish their patriotic credentials before they were called before the commissions. In Péronne for instance, Marie-Louise Bigorne, attempted to dispel the anti-patriotic stigma attached to women who had coexisted with the enemy force under occupation, by not only stating in her dossier that she was a widow, but (using capital letters), that her husband was "MORT POUR LA FRANCE".[58] Two other members of her family likewise attempted to strengthen the emotional weight behind their mother's claim for war damages, by applying for the honorific award of a medal for *victimes de l'invasion.*[59] They were however denounced by neighbours for having had 'intimate relations' with German soldiers when the municipal police snooped around for evidence to test the legitimacy of their claims. Marie-Louise Bigorne's own war damage claim appears to have suffered accordingly from this moral stain. Awarded an insufficient sum by the Péronne cantonal commission, she was obliged to state her case anew to the *tribunal des dommages de guerre.*

The Marie-Louise Bigorne case was from unique. Nor was the reinvention of a wartime past (in the hope of lessening the stigmas attached to transgressions of 1914-18), gender-specfic. Across the *pays-boches* of 1914-18, this act emerges as an identifiable trait of post-war social reconstruction. Péronne's pre-war magistrate, M.Carpentier was likewise unsuccessful in his pursuit of a post-war award of the *Légion d'Honneur 'pour services exceptionels qu'il avait rendus à la population pendant l'occupation allemande.'* His claim of having suffered

[58] ADS.10R1012 Dommages de guerre de Péronne.
[59] ADS5Z96, Péronne, affaires communales. Commissariat de police to *sous-préfet*, 20 December 1920.

brutalities at the hands of the enemy, having been a hostage, and having made numerous material gifts to fellow inhabitants throughout the course of the war, were denounced as falsehoods. From testimonies gathered from neighbours, the police concluded that Carpentier's desire for a civilian honour was borne from an attempt to rebuild a moral reputation which had been compromised by wartime relations with a local prostitute.[60] Similarly unsuccessful were Charles Soufflet's attempts to gain a medal as a victim of the invasion; despite spending a period in a German prison camp, his accusers claimed that his captivity had been defined by a *régime privilégié*. In the commune of Cortigny, the demand by a local *curé* to acquire honorific recognition as a war hostage was turned down when the claim was proved to be groundless, whilst in Cléry, Raymond Lombard and his wife Marie-Cécile both met local opposition to their request for a medal as victims of the invasion. Neighbours attested that M. Lombard's injury from a shell blast was only slight, and that his claim to have been injured in a later explosion was fictitious. Similar denials met their claims that their home had been bombed and that they had suffered maltreatment by the enemy for having hidden stores of grain.[61]

In each of these attempts to distort a personal history of the occupation for the purpose of financial gain, the oppressive terms under which the Somme's post-war communities 'rebuilt' themselves is underlined. The violent denunciations which so frequently accompanied civilian claims for honorific medals, were not simply a consequence of a contested past, but equally, the social strains of a highly contested future. Amongst all of the *sinistrés* there existed a singular desire to gain a favourable evaluation from the commission and (at all costs) to achieve this before the money from the Ministry for the Liberated

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[60] ADS.5Z96, Péronne, affaires communales.Commissariat de Police to the *sous-préfet*, 20 December 1920.
[61] ADS.5Z17 Cléry, affaires communales.

Regions ran dry. *Sinistrés* of the Somme may have stressed their common identity in opposition to the state at politically opportune moments, but local animosity created by the competition for war damages, was a constant factor. If as Pifre suggested, the equality of hardship in the red zone could engender social unity and bring an end to political division, then the promise of a future defined by the bricks and mortar of definitive reconstruction appeared to operate as an opposing force:

> In the depths of their misery, a single hope kept the *sinistrés* going, a beautiful dream, under a tin roof through which the rain pissed upon them. They only thought of the pretty home they would one day possess, and forgot everything else. They saw it there, with its 2 floors and its 2 pillars at the entrance of the garden, just like the villas owned by the rich.[62]

The inevitable consequence of this collective desire, concluded Roland Dorgelès, was social poison. *Sinistrés* would 'trample on their best friends' in order to gain a favourable position in the queue for reconstruction;[63] their sole fear being that 'their neighbours would gain more than them.'[64]Dramatised though the novelist's picture of the ruins may have been, it epitomised the uneasiness which prevailed amongst the red zone communities in the post-war period. The fragile nature of the financial assurances underpinning the reconstruction of northern France, rendered this an inevitability.

Reconstruction and Social Class

Though *Le réveil des morts* was very much the literary fruit borne from direct experience of life in the ruins, Dorgelès's pessimism about the post-war world had deeper, more diverse

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[62] Roland Dorgelès, *Le réveil des morts,* p.131.
[63] Ibid., p.149.
[64] Ibid., p.131.

origins. The climactic scene of *Le réveil des morts* reflected the artistic influence of Gance's *J'accuse* both in terms of its narrative form and moral condemnation of civilian greed. The predominant political tone of the novel likewise replayed themes of post-war marginality which had been explored in *Les croix de bois*. Sulphart, the *mutilé de guerre* released from military service on the Western Front, was the mouthpiece through which Dorgelès had expressed his despair with civilian France in *Les croix de bois*. Returning to Paris from the front, Sulphart discovers from his concierge that his wife ('she was filth, that wife of yours') has left him for a Belgian refugee.[65] Unable to gain employment in his former workplace due to his injury, the former *poilu* experiences financial poverty as well as encountering the moral and emotional poverty of civilians who remain stonily indifferent to the *poilus* amongst them. Victory ceases to be an event loaded with its traditional sense of patriotic meaning; the harsh realities of capitalist society determine that if it exists at all, it may be defined solely by the triumph of each survivor over death: 'I believe it is a victory' reflects Sulphart, 'because I have come out of it alive.'[66] In *Le réveil des morts*, this fragile sense of meaning is seen to snap amidst the abject ruins of the Western Front. Once more, the victim is an impoverished *mutilé*. Rejected as a *fossoyeur* by the entrepreneur Bouzier due to his inability to exhume sufficient numbers of war dead from the fields each day, Canivet (the former *poilu*) commits suicide by drowning himself in the river. In both works, the political message is unequivocally clear: for all its horrors, life in the trenches is less degrading than the pitiless conquest of capitalism taking place behind the lines, and the petty faith in *chacun à soi* it engenders amongst ordinary civilians. Central to the story of reconstruction recounted by Dorgelès is the inexorable strengthening of the bourgeoisie and the progressive alienation of those whose wartime endeavours had laid the foundations of this strength. This was

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[65] Roland Dorgelès, *Les croix de bois*, p.243
[66] Ibid., p.248.

symbolised in *Le réveil des morts* both by the anonymous death of Canivet and the bourgeois Republic's moral endorsement of Bouzier through the award of the *Légion d'Honneur*. Reconstruction thus construed, is little other than the triumph of the profiteer, powerfully represented here by a businessman who clothed himself 'with the skin of the dead.'[67]

From the prevailing political themes expounded in the red zone press, we know that Dorgelès was far from alone in viewing reconstruction as a crude replication of the social structures which had divided France prior to the war. Simplistic though the profiteer/victim dichotomy may appear, it is nonetheless worth relating to the specific case of Albert. We might therefore ask: to what extent did the reconstruction of this town and its community mirror the ideological design of a particular social class?

Clearly, the Dorgelèsian concept of reconstruction as an unfettered victory of one class over another, needs to be carefully qualified. Reconstruction was after all, a response to the devastation of war; its patterns being predominantly shaped by the economic strains of the previous 4 years. At the moment when the Third Republic finally committed itself to the egalitarian ideals of the *Charte des sinistrés* and harnessed itself to the financial burden of war pensions, the nation's economic problems could hardly have been more critical. In 4 years of warfare, 40 billion francs worth of overseas investments had been all but lost, bringing to an end the global hegemony of the world's premier *rentier* state.[68] Unwilling as ever to risk a middle class backlash through a policy of heavy taxation on capital, the wartime state had preferred to borrow money rather than to raise fiscal revenue; as a result, the national debt had increased almost ten fold on its 1914 figure.[69] By 1918, the loans

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[67] Ibid., p.279
[68] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, p.50
[69] Herbert Tint, *France since 1918*, (London, 1970), p.11

acquired by the Third Republic from Britain and the United States totalled 15,000 million and 18,500 million francs respectively.[70] Neither of France's wartime allies showed any post-war inclination towards alleviating this burden. Hoping that the United States (the only major economic power to have emerged strengthened by the Great War) might soften its attitude towards devastated France, Louis Klotz (Clemenceau's finance minister) had requested a revision of the loan. This was rejected in November 1918. The French treasury was further weakened when New York and London mutually agreed to return to the cut-throat dynamics of the international money market by withdrawing their support for the franc in March 1919.[71] Denied crucial tax revenues by the devastation of the Western Front's 10 departments (hitherto this region had been the republic's fiscal milch-cow, contributing 20% of state revenues, before the war rendered it the nation's greatest financial drain) France was also left massively dependent upon imports of raw materials at a time when its currency was beginning a dramatic post-war free-fall. Iron and Steel output from the north was around than 5% of what it had been in 1914.[72]National coal output had likewise been cut by approximately 50% by the systematic dynamiting and flooding of mines in Nord and Pas-de-Calais. Post-war coal imports (much of the coal being bought from Britain, exposing the perilously weak status of the post-war franc) had risen by 100% in order to compensate for the absence of coal production in the north; this now stood at around 400 million tons per year. At the moment when Louis Klotz produced his first post-war budget, most economists were inclined to predict that '5 or 6 years of the most severe financial problems any country has ever experienced' awaited the post-war republic, before its economy attained a semblance of stability.[73]

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[70] Ibid., p.17
[71] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, p.81
[72] Ibid., p.79
[73] Silverman, *Reconstructing Europe* p.70

Without first rescuing France's industrial base from its state of wartime ruin, it was painfully clear that the wider aims of reconstruction, encompassed in the *Charte des sinistrés* would be dead in the water. For those who construed the rebuilding of France to be an event of class based favouritism, the paradox of reconstruction was evident from the moment of its conception: for the veneer of legal equality amongst all *sinistrés* to be preserved, their social inequalities would have to deepen. During the first decade of peace, the Dorgelèsian view that the state's war chest amounted to little more than the private property of the industrial and commercial class, would be largely substantiated across the Western Front.

'Only the industrialists could think about rebuilding...the other *sinistrés* could only sit down and wait for a miracle to happen.[74]' Roland Dorgelès's observation of the re-emergence of a pre-war social hierarchy in the ruins was made with the work of the ORI and the ORA very much in mind.[75] These centrally managed agencies provided the finance through which the state's hard-headed economic logic could ultimately be brought to bear on the debris of 1914-18. Established by the law of 6 August 1917, the ORI largely usurped the role of the cantonal commissions in the domain of industrial reconstruction. The aim of the state in 1917 had been to extend the productive capacity of the war economy by providing a quick supply of machinery and raw materials to factories in war zones liberated by the German retreat.[76] In the aftermath of the war, the ORI switched its priorities to industrial sectors with a direct influence on reconstruction. Industrialists in the sectors of gas, electricity and building materials were the first to benefit from its funds. Managed from Paris with regional sections across the Western Front, ORI and ORA finance was channelled directly to the departmental

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[74] Dorgelès, *Le réveil des morts*, p.14
[75] Ibid., p.14, Dorgelès made reference to the ORI in a footnote.
[76] Bernard Fournier "La reconstruction industrielle" in *Reconstructions en Picardie* p.191.

prefect, and proved to be far less vulnerable to the systematic budget slashing undertaken by the Ministry for the Liberated Regions in the early 1920s. Responsible for fewer *sinistrés* than the cantonal commissions, the departmental bodies of the ORI and ORA were also much speedier in their work. Dossiers dispatched by industrialists from Albert to the ORI in 1920, were evaluated within 8 weeks, a stark contrast to the tortuous pace of the cantonal commissions.[77] In pressing their war damage claims directly to these twin organisations, landowners and industrialists could thus avoid the financial shortfalls of municipal budgets, and by-pass the politically-charged bodies of the red zone's commissions. By the end of January 1920, 34 industrialists and small business owners from Albert had applied for war damage compensation through this body.[78]

Both within the locality of Albert and across the Western Front as a whole, the fruit of ORI labour was the most impressive feature of reconstruction in the first half of the 1920s. At the time of the armistice, a total of 29,332 factories lay in ruins, prompting from Albert Lebrun the gloomy prediction that the project of restoration would take more than two decades to accomplish. But by January 1921, 18,091 had been rebuilt,[79] and by the middle of the decade, this immense project was almost complete; 87% of the Western Front's industrialists had received ORI money and invested it in the successful reconstruction of their factories. These statistics compare very favourably with the sluggish pace at which domestic property was rebuilt: 741,933 had been destroyed by war in 1914-18, but just over one third had been restored by January 1921. By the mid-1920s, this figure hovered at around 50%. Albert's own reconstruction largely reflects this global pattern. SRRL reports in March 1925 suggest that here too, the ORI project of industrial restoration was reaching its point of completion. The

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[77] ADS.10R45, Dommages de guerre d'Albert. Dossier Caquelain.
[78] ADS.10R26, Dommages de guerre d'Albert. ORI report, 26 January 1920.
[79] Lavalard et Embry, 1914-18, *La reconstruction dans la Somme* p.3

report stated that 80% of the town's major factories were fully operative. In two of the remaining major workshops, the fires in Abel Pifre's *Usine Otis-Pifre* were due to be lit in the following month; Henri Potez, the mayor of Méaulte (likewise disgraced with Pifre for early flight from the war zone in 1914) owned an aviation factory (employing 300 workers from Albert and Méaulte) which was also on the verge of completion. The statistics pointed towards a dramatic regeneration of the desert landscape surveyed by Albert Londres in 1918. Amongst certain sections of the community, this industrial and social rebirth had been the cause of local celebration. One month prior to the 1925 municipal elections, Pifre had provided a political endorsement of the achievements of Albert's industrialists by organising a fête to mark Albert's 'rise from the ruins.' Concerts, public balls and toasts to the workers in the newly opened factories were the principal events choreographed by the mayor.[80] Present in the town were journalists from the Paris magazine *L'Illustration* which paid tribute to the mayor, stating that 'the council which has presided over the rebirth of Albert will assume a high position in the modern history of the town...the gratitude of future generations is assured.[81]'

The generational issue is worthy of consideration. Rather pointedly, *L'Illustration* equated the significance of Albert's 'rebirth' with its economic and social legacy. Though far from being physically complete, the physical edifice of Albert was already being construed as a site of memory; a triumphant monument to the labour of post-war reconstruction. The social and political nuances which had directed this 'rebirth' were largely ignored. If the 'gratitude of future generations' was assured, did this also apply to Albert's post-war electorate? Seemingly not. Five years after the decisive triumph of the Catholic Right over Radicals and

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[80] ADS.5Z75, Albert, affaires communales, mayor to the *sous-préfet*, 24 march 1925.
[81] ADS.100PER1, *La Tribune Picarde*, 5 August 1928. *L'Illustration* was quoted in this edition.

Socialists in the 1919 election, Pifre's *Union de la Reconstitution* was heavily defeated by Émile Leturcq's *Union des Gauches*, which now included Louis Cretel, the metallurgical factory worker, whose own war damage claim had been contemptuously dismissed by Pifre's allies in 1920. Though the triumph of the Left in Albert mirrored a national trend, which in the legislative elections of 1924 had brought the *Cartel des Gauches* to power, the size of the victory (Pifre received just 305 votes, compared with Emile Leturcq's 962) suggested a greater shift to the left than that which had occurred on a national level in the legislative elections. There seems little doubt as to why this was so. The very evident successes of the ORI in laying down the essential infrastructure of future economic stability in the 1920s contrasted sharply with the ever decreasing funds emanating from the Somme's communes to their remaining *sinistrés*. Reporting on mid-decade reconstruction in Aisne, *L'Illustration* had observed that in St.Quentin 'immense new factories had been established in the middle of the ruins and their lamentable habitations.' Parallel impressions could have been made of Albert, had the magazine been less intent on stressing its public approval of Pifre. Beyond the town's very visible symbols of industrial triumph, and the redbrick streets of Rue de Gomicourt and Rue de Bordeaux built through major bank loans, *Le Village* and its fellow provisional quarters were larger than ever. One thousand new buildings had been erected in Albert since the end of the war, but over 50% of the town remained in ruins.[82] Albert's hospital continued to consist of a huddled group of wartime nissens; work had not yet begun on any of the town's other public buildings, save the *école des garçons* and the *école des filles*.[83] The physical form of the new towns emerging across the Western Front mirrored a singularly uncomfortable truth. In the words of M.Caillaux, (finance minister during the

[82] ADS.5Z75, Albert, affaires communales, SRRL report, 30 March 1925
[83] ADS.KZ1633, Visit of Jammy Schmidt to Albert, September 1925

short-lived Herriot administration of 1925) *les petits sinistrés* of the Western Front were being 'trampled in to the dust.'[84]

Elsewhere in Albert's canton, this imbalance between industrial, agricultural and domestic reconstruction was arguably greater than in the *chef-lieu*. Three hundred villages across the Somme remained bereft of brick-built town halls; over 100 of these had failed even to draw up preliminary architectural plans for any of their communal buildings. 'It is sadly true' wrote the *Gazette de Péronne*, 'that the majority of reconstructed buildings in our region are commercial, industrial or agricultural and that the homes of the workers are almost completely missing.'[85] Stronger words emanated from the red zone's councillors and *fonctionnaires*. Bécordel's war damage claim for communal buildings had still not been evaluated by the cantonal commission in 1924, a situation which the mayor regarded as 'scandalous': 'I would be grateful if you could inform me whether the state is still obliged to rebuild destroyed schools, and whether the children of the devastated regions are obliged to be considered as pariahs' he asked the *sous-préfet* in 1924.[86] In Logueval, *fonctionnaires* complained that whilst many of their counterparts in Albert (paid at a 20% higher rate) had already moved in to their new homes, the entire village remained housed in provisional huts; the presence of vermin in the nissens made food impossible to conserve, and poor roadways continued to cut the village off from its neighbours.[87] In Bazentin, wells damaged or destroyed in the Great War remained in the same state and continued to pose water supply problems.[88] During the visit of Jammy Schmidt to Albert in 1925 (Schmidt was

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[84] ADS.241PER5, *La Gazette de Péronne,* 17 June 1925.
[85] ADS.241PER4, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 18 June 1924.
[86] ADS.5Z7, Bécordel, affaires communales, mayor of Bécordel to the *sous-préfet* of Péronne, 21 June 1934.
[87] ADS.KZ1024, SRRL report, 23 February 1925.
[88] ADS.5Z5, Bazentin, affaires communales, mayor of Bazentin to the *sous-préfet*, 5 February 1924.

under-secretary for the Liberated Regions) a teacher from the village of Bouzincourt pointed out that only 2 schools per year had been rebuilt in the Somme since the armistice. A further 280 remained in ruins. In his estimation, were the tortuous pace of reconstruction to continue, a further 140 years would be required before 'our children could be housed in brick schools, whilst the cattle have for a long time been settled in their sheds.'[89]

Was this disparity simply reflective of the economic necessities which had been shaped by the war? In the work of the ORI and the ORA the harsh logic of economic reconstruction is clearly discernible, but the social patterns established by the rebuilding of Albert, cannot be wholly divorced from the ideological designs of its municipal politicians. A significant percentage of the rebuilding which took place between 1921-25 (around 25%) had in fact been financed by private bank loans following a policy initiated by Pifre himself. Over thirty million francs were allocated to the town from France's banking houses in this period; it is in the division of these spoils that we are provided with the clearest indications of how the town's *social* reconstruction may have manifested itself.

Of principal significance was the state's first major loan to the devastated regions. *L'emprunt sur Albert* totalled 25 million francs and was underwritten by the Crédit National, Crédit du Nord, La Banque National du Crédit, Crédit Foncier and La Banque Générale du Nord. Details of the loan were announced by the Ministry for the Liberated Regions in April 1921.[90] Underlined in the ministry's choice of Albert as the Western Front's first recipient of a major loan, was its primary commitment to the restoration of its industrial towns. Due to its geographical proximity to the larger (and considerably less damaged) industrial centre of

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[89] ADS.KZ1633, Visit of Jammy Schmidt to Albert, 25 September 1925.
[90] AMA. Council minutes, 2 and 7 May 1921. The loan was to be repaid in 30 annual instalments of 2,114,810 francs, beginning in 1930.

Amiens, Albert's economic and demographic vulnerability had been painfully clear since the end of the Great War. Though the 50 km ruling on total war reparation in the April 1919 law provided some form of protection[91], it did not preclude the possibility that Albert's industrialists could choose to relocate in the departmental capital without forfeiting any of their reparation payments. In such a scenario, the majority of Albert's *sinistrés* would have been caught between the desire to rebuild on their former ruins and the economic necessity of seeking employment elsewhere. By protecting the town (and a significant number of its *sinistrés*) from the worst extremes of the financial crises which prevailed across the devastated regions in the 1920s, the *emprunt* of 1921 rendered the town's reconstruction eminently more realisable. Of the 25 million francs loaned to the town, 1 million francs financed the reconstruction of the *école des garçons* and the *école des filles* in Place Faidherbe; almost 5 million francs helped to accelerate the rebuilding of the town's factories. Similar amounts of money were likewise allocated for the town's commercial and agricultural sectors; 68 private homes and 16 *maisons locataires* were to be built with the remaining portion of the 25 million francs.[92] The initial *emprunt* paved the way, for further loans between the town, its *sinistrés* and banks such as L'Union Industriel de Crédit in the 1920s[93], contributing in the words of Jean-Michel Declercq, to 'perhaps the most successful act of urban reconstruction in Picardie.'[94]

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[91] ADS.2K361, *Journal Officiel*, 18 April 1919. Article 7 of the 17 April law declared that *sinistrés* who chose not to rebuild in the ruins of their former communes, or within a 50 km radius of similarly devastated territory, would receive only the value of their losses as calculated on 30 June 194. Wartime and post-war inflation would thus be excluded from any payment.

[92] AMA. Council minutes, 11 November 1921.

[93] ADS.5Z75, Albert, affaires communales, SRRL report, March 1925.

[94] Declercq, "La reconstruction Triomphante d'Albert" in *Reconstructions en Picardie*, p.189.

Declerq's view of Albert is informed by a perception of reconstruction as a fundamentally physical labour. As such, it skates over the social significance of the loan in determining the 'haves' and 'have-nots' of the town. Considerable though the loan was, its beneficiaries were limited in number. The financial rewards of the *emprunt sur Albert* would ultimately filter down to the families of 112 *sinistrés,* who pooled their war damage claims together and formed (under the management of the mayor) *le Groupement Abel Pifre*[95]. A further 330 *sinistré* families would likewise benefit from forming their own co-operative groups (named *La Concorde, La Vigilante, L'Économique* and *La Renaissance*), which brokered independent loans from France's banking houses. Given the uncertain financial climate which predominated during the post-war period, the numbers of *sinistrés* who opted for the relative security of reconstruction through private finance initiatives (as opposed to waiting in hope rather than expectation, for remuneration of war damages via the municipal coffers) is surprisingly low. Why was this so? Some *sinistrés* may have declined to join because of their misgivings about surrendering control over the employment of their future reparation payments. Though the precise sum allocated to each *sinistré* by the evaluation commissions remained inalienable, it would be paid directly in to the collective account of a co-operative group, denying the individual the right of access or control over his (or her) resources. By joining such organisations, *sinistrés* were trusting their fortune in the lottery system of financial allocation employed by the co-operatives' leadership: upon the order in which their names emerged from the *tirage au sort*, depended the length of time in which they remained condemned to the discomfort of life in a nissen. Other *sinistrés* had little choice in the matter of joining a co-operative: access to the *Groupement Abel Pifre* (and its money) was governed by a property franchise; of the 112 *sinistrés* who had responded to the mayor's invitation, all were property owners. Each of the co-operative societies created in its wake was founded on

[95] ADS.5Z75, Albert, Affaires Communales, SRRL report, march 1925

the same principle of rebuilding the town's property owning class. *Sinistrés* claiming relatively small sums of money (*locataires* with losses encompassing only domestic items) provided insufficient funds to the collective war chest of the co-operatives and were thus excluded from their ranks. Albert's initial 'rise from the ruins' was thus a class-specific affair, it drew clear distinctions between two types of *sinistré* via the physical form of the mid-decade dwellings they inhabited. Protected and preserved by the major bank loans, Albert's property owning class belonged to what may be described as the *post-war* town. 'Abandoned to their fates' (in the words of one councillor[96]), the town's *isolés* (those excluded from Albert's co-operatives) remained both physically and psychologically part of a community whose lives were shaped by the *aftermath* of war. For the *isolés*, the post-war era had not yet begun.

For those whose property qualification permitted them access to the *sociétés coopératives* the benefits of so acting manifested themselves in the speed with which they could rebuild their homes. All profited from the systematic queue jumping instigated by the state as it attempted to forge some form of order and logic from the dossiers which 'piled up in mountains' in offices across the devastated regions.[97] Condemned by the Parisian press for its stewardship of *une reconstruction ruineuse*[98], and roundly criticised by German technocrats for the slow pace of reconstruction[99], the Ministry for the Liberated Regions faced increasing pressure to demonstrate that the immense national and international investments made in the ruins were producing tangible results. In the aftermath of the large scale commitment made by the banks through the *emprunt sur Albert*, reconstruction attained new extremes of political

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[96] AMA. Council minutes, July 1922.
[97] Clout, *After the Ruins*, p.183
[98] ADS.1083/8. An article bearing this title appeared in *L'Écho de Paris* in October 1922
[99] ADS.265PER1, *La Voix des Ruines*, 13 December 1921.

importance. Echoing the ministry's concerns that bureaucratic chaos would ultimately erode the benefits of the *emprunt* (though the loan took place in a period of deflation, the economic outlook remained wholly unpredictable) Abel Pifre had warned his council that the resources acquired by the *Groupement Abel Pifre* 'must not be allowed to sit in the bank.'[100] This was in effect, a call to the cantonal commissions to sort out their own disorder and allow the members of his *groupement* immediate priority in the evaluation process. This policy was wholly endorsed by the state, and each of the town's other co-operatives were consequently favoured in a similar fashion. Reversing the slow pace and haphazard methods which prevailed over the evaluation of dossiers of the *sinistrés isolés*, the evaluation commissions worked diligently to accelerate the processing of co-operative war damage claims. Acting on the instructions of the departmental inspector for the cantonal commissions, each of their presidents held meetings with the leadership of co-operative groups in order to establish the precise nature of their rebuilding project, and the order in which they wished their members' work to be carried out. Whilst *sinistrés isolés* frequently complained of two year gaps in which only silence emanated from the commissions, co-operatives such as *La Concorde* ultimately found themselves pressurised by the same bodies to complete and dispatch the remaining dossiers of their members.[101] The results of this prioritised method of evaluation were crucial to the speed with which private property within the town was rebuilt. Though the members of the *groupements* and co-operatives of Albert accounted for less than 10% of the town's pre-war population, they possessed more than 50% of the buildings which had been completed by 1925. By the middle of the decade, *La Vigilante* had spent a third of its 2,400,000 loan and had rebuilt 22 houses; *La Concorde* had spent 3,900,000 francs on 90 new buildings; *L'Économique* had overseen the rebuilding of 80 homes at a cost of 2,500,000

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[100] AMA. Council minutes, 5 August 1921.

[101] ADS.10R25. Dommages de guerre d'Albert, President of the first cantonal commission to the departmental inspector, 27 January 1921.

francs. Of the 25 million francs from the 1921 *emprunt sur Albert*, only 5 million remained to be spent; 250 buildings had already emerged from the ruins for the members of this co-operative. Most significantly, the SRRL report of 1925 concluded that the work carried out by all but one of the co-operatives had taken place without any of the stoppages which had hit other *sinistrés* due to a lack of municipal funds.[102]

Given the wholesale devastation which had befallen Albert in the Great War, the logic of prioritising a property owning class appears indisputable. But in this division of financial spoils, a decidedly bourgeois conception of reconstruction was revealed. Unconsciously perhaps, the associational meanings of victory were becoming ever more closely aligned with the preservation of pre-war social structures and ever more distanced from the moral structures of the *union sacrée*. Ideological necessity prevailed and a blind eye had been turned on a key structural change in the post-war community. *Propriétaires* -those whose income was either wholly or largely derived from the rents of their tenants- were largely absent from the post-war ruins and so too was their money. Deterred by the grindingly slow process of domestic reconstruction, many had been lured by the promise of quicker returns on ORI financed projects, and had diverted their investments from houses to factories. The very successes of the ORI in the early 1920s thus contributed to a long term shortfall in local housing stocks. Far from being hidden from the view of the Somme's politicians, this looming housing crisis was made explicit in a report to the prefect in 1922.[103] Other factors, similarly visible to those with a political hand in the reconstruction process, were also at play in impeding the reformation of the *propriétaire* class. We cannot for example, discount the prejudices which prevailed amongst members of the evaluation commissions. Encountering

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[102] ADS.5Z75, Albert, Affaires Communales, SRRL report, March 1925.
[103] ADS.KZ1024, SRRL report, September 1922.

the underlying misogyny of those who judged their claims, widowed women such as Mme Vve. Bomblèd Bossu had been were severely handicapped in the number of properties they were able to rebuild. The regular basis upon which these gender-informed evaluations took place set in motion a social effect which encompassed not only the property owners themselves, but the tenants who depended upon them.

Finally, there were the hardships of the ruins themselves. Deterred by the nature of life in the post-war ruins, a significant number of Albert's *propriétaires* sought to avoid resettlement in the red zone until their own homes had been rebuilt. Often, this came at a considerable price; for long-term refugees without any other income, exile was sustainable only by offloading excess properties through the sale of war damage claims. The practise of commodifying the legal right to reconstruction payments appears to have been commonplace across the Western Front. Dorgelès describes posters emblazoned across provisional villages, in which entrepreneurs advertised their desire to purchase the war damage claims of those unwilling to suffer the hardship of resettlement.[104] In Albert as we have seen, the practise of speculation on war damages had been rife from the time of the 'genial retreat' of the German army in 1917. It proved to be something of a double edged sword in the reconstruction of the town. The policy pursued by successive council administrations of purchasing war damage claims from individual *sinistrés* and (with the aid of their very overt political muscle) obtaining generous evaluations from the commission, bore clear fruit. Much of the finance for ambitious public projects such as the rebuilding of the town hall was derived from this source. But if as Declercq's eulogy suggests, the outward success of this policy was undeniable, the impressive physical facade of the town could not wholly disguise the distortions inherent in its reconstruction. By 1932, when the town prepared to celebrate its

[104] Roland Dorgelès, *Le réveil des morts*, p. 183.

inauguration, these social distortions would be evidenced by the physical presence of *Le Village*, straddling the outskirts of the town in much the same form (and size) as it had in 1919. It was here that the *isolés* ultimately came to reside, the absence of rented housing stocks in the town determining that their inhabitation of the nissens and tar-coated huts thrown up in the aftermath of war would be the longest in duration. Thus, Albert acquired and maintained a dual identity, both as a provisional town in the *aftermath* of war and a modern town in the *post-war* era. The seeds of this subtle process of fracture had been sewn in the *emprunts* of the early 1920s.

Year	Nissens and Huts	Population
1921	138	459
1926	174	587
1931	129	387

Table 6: Provisional housing and population in *Le Village*, 1921-31 (ADS.16M1)

Qui Paiera?: The Politics of Denial

Reconstruction presents itself through a series of parallel histories. For Albert's industrialists and co-operative members, memories of devastation and hardship were themselves being 'reconstructed' through assimilation and association with the linguistic formulae of remembrance and post-war myth by the middle of the 1920s. For the remaining *isolés*, reconstruction remained an uncertain future event, stripping meaning from the self-congratulatory endorsements of collective achievement which had taken place in 1925. The anguish which many suffered in the 1920s were largely consequential to the financial

crises which almost perpetually engulfed the treasury in Paris, and the grindingly slow work of their own evaluation commissions. Separate though these issues may appear, they were in reality, two dimensions of a singular post-war phenomenon, which may be referred to here as 'the politics of denial.'

Denial, as Eric Leed has argued, lay at the heart of post-war world: 'The injunction to forget the experience of war,' explains Leed, 'is a peculiar and defining feature of our twentieth century industrial wars fought by citizen soldiers in their millions.'[105] Far more than a *cultural* obligation, limited to soldiers whose experiences lay beyond the moral parameters of the spoken word, denial informed the political dialogue of nations and national governments. Peace brought with it the singular need to reinvent European identity, negating the civilisation/ barbarian dichotomy which had entrenched itself in the collective imagination of 1914-18. Ideological bonds between wartime countries were once more superseded by economic ties. Implicit in this act of reconstruction was a revision of the system of values attached to *la dette morale*. Blood tax in the post-war world would suffer its inevitable, inexorable devaluation; the same process would likewise befall the moral appeal of the *sinistrés*.

Some *sinistrés* as we have seen, were more equal than others. Albert's own commissions were no less active in the process of reconceptualizing *la dette morale* than their government in Paris, or indeed governments and societies throughout Europe. The uniform nature of devastation in Albert and the bureaucratic chaos which reigned throughout the canton may have given the initial phase of reconstruction a veneer of haphazard social equality, but by

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[105] E.J. Leed, "Fateful Memories: Industrialized Warfare and Traumatic Neuroses." In *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol.35, no.1, January 2000, p.88

1925 its true ideological mould had emerged. Whilst reconstruction projects managed by co-operatives bore their fruit and factories were rebuilt with impressive speed, it was the *isolés* in the canton who discovered their claims to be somehow lying at the bottom of the heap; social worth had replaced moral debt as the defining element of evaluation.

Despite the legal equalities of the *Charte des sinistrés*, *isolés* discovered the process of evaluation to be weighted against them in a number of ways. For instance, whilst co-operatives employed architects and solicitors to draw up impressive dossiers for each of their members, an astonishing number of written claims had to be returned to the *isolés* due to inaccuracies deemed unacceptable by the commissions. Over 1,000 such dossiers were rejected by Albert's commissions in 1919 alone. Similar numbers of rejections emanated from commissions elsewhere in the arrondissement of Péronne: from a total of 14,943 damage claims sent to the commissions by October 1919, around half (7,429) were returned; just 345 being considered fit for evaluation.[106] Most of these dossiers were rejected on the grounds of elementary mistakes made by the ill-educated : 'It is often the case that *sinistrés* do not know the exact date of their birth, or their marriage and that they ignore the number and order of their forenames complained the president of the Bray commission to the *sous-préfet* in 1920.[107] This show of bureaucratic pedantry was not however without a certain element of financial logic. The growth in the number of rejected dossiers reflected concerns with the potential for fraudulent abuses of the system; concerns which grew in proportion to a worsening economic climate.

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[106] ADS.KZ1540, Cantonal commission report, 9 October 1919.
[107] ADS.5Z51, Méricourt, Affaires Communales. President of the second cantonal commission to the *sous-préfet*, 24 October 1920.

It is perhaps improbable that any form of state-financed reconstruction could ever take place without mobilising a degree of profiteering, but it seems clear that abuses in 1919-20 were partly the consequences of legal oversights in the *Charte des sinistrés*. Despite the evident problems which had emerged in 1872 when evaluations had been managed by overly-generous municipal councils, no provision had been made in the April 1919 law to deter dishonest *sinistrés* from exaggerating their claim. In fact, the sole reference made to those who would be excluded from state funding for criminal activities, referred to military deserters and soldiers convicted of other serious crimes by military courts.[108] Moral obligations to the Great War's civilian victims appear to have overridden a more pragmatic approach to reconstruction law. For Henri Bernard and Philippe Dubief, this legal flaw is central to many of the problems which followed:

> The law allowed valuations which were far too high. As it was accepted for a long time that 'the Boche would pay' it was patriotic to help the claimant to overvalue his property.[109]

Echoes of the same argument may be found in de Sousa's work,[110] but it seems highly contentious that a reconstruction driven by the ideology of class structure would succumb so easily to the universal lure of patriotism.Informal favours certainly took place between those with suitable connections with the cantonal commissions and the ORI (in two of the more noteworthy scandals, a sugar refiner from Nord acquired a staggering 126 million francs of ORI money from fraudulent claims[111], whilst a well connected senator from Aisne claimed war damages calculated at four times higher than the departmental coefficient[112]), but to

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[108] ADS.2K361, *Journal Officiel*, 18 April 1919. Article 52 of the *charte des sinistrés* excluded any French soldier or French subject who had deserted from the army in 1914-18 .
[109] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, p.131.
[110] De Sousa, *La reconstruction et sa Mémoire* pp.80-81.
[111] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, p.131
[112] ADS.265PER1, *La Voix des Ruines*, 4 March 1922

assume that anti-German sentiment provided the basis for a socially egalitarian form of largesse, is to wholly misunderstand the social dimension of reconstruction. If anything, the loophole in the law encouraged red zone mayors to gain a greater foothold in the evaluation process (and thus to impose their own social values) by creating improvised forms of defence against fraud and abuse. In July 1920, when the vast majority of Albert's war damage dossiers lay in the provisional town hall ready for dispatch to the cantonal commission, Abel Pifre instructed his councillors to scrutinise them for potential abuses.[113] This informal act of evaluation was endorsed by the prefect in 1921, when it was decided that a *mission spéciale* (consisting of 3 members from local councils) should operate in each village in order to 'assess the reality of each claim.'[114] Five months prior to this, the national assembly had itself taken the inevitable steps towards a more draconian policy on war damage exaggerations. In August 1920, the chamber voted to impose prison sentences of between 8 days and 2 years (or fines of up to 10,000 francs) for those found guilty of false claims; all future claims would be disqualified by the commission and the judgement imposed upon the guilty party could be published in two newspapers chosen by a local *tribunal correctionelle.*[115] This reinforced the 'high court' approach of the cantonal commissions towards its *sinistrés* which had been derided in the red zone press since the beginning of their operations in 1919. In stark contrast to the carefree handling of state finance which was at the same time shaping the policies of the ORI, few *isolés* called before the canton's first commission received the war damages for which they had claimed. Archival evidence shows that of 338 dossiers evaluated in 1921, just 47 claims were upheld by the commission as wholly legitimate. Many

[113] AMA. Council minutes of July 1920.
[114] AMA. Council minutes, January 1921.
[115] ADS.2K369, *Journal Officiel*, 29 August 1920. This was article 7 of a law passed on 25 August 1920.

evaluations were lowered by between 10-20%, though more severe judgements, decreasing claims by up to 50% were not uncommon.[116]

Far from demonstrating a nation's complacent trust in the financial mirage of *le Boche paiera* as Bernard and Dubief have contended, reconstruction could be said to have revealed the social and political responses of a bourgeois republic in the face of the virtual disintegration of its financial and monetary system. The world, as Dan Silverman puts it 'had been cut adrift from its traditional moorings.'[117] Profound fears over the capacity of the state to exact recompense from its enemy not only preceded the *Charte des sinistrés* of April 1919, but were apparent amidst the euphoria of the armistice itself. This was evident from the speed with which the Amiens press turned its attention away from contemplation of victory in November 1918. Whilst Paris based newspapers such as *Le Figaro* persisted for a number of post-war weeks in covering their pages with poetical outpourings about the nation's deliverance, *Le Progrès de la Somme* began to assess the cold economic realities of aftermath, conceptualising Europe's political and economic predicament in an article entitled *Qui Paiera? Eux ou Vous?*:

> We are letting ourselves become seduced by the young German Republic, already so dear to the citizens of the world. We are holding out *our* fraternal hand to the Boche and we are allowing the bill for the destruction of Belgium and France to slip from *their* fraternal hand.[118]

Whether it was consciously intended or not, the journal had aptly demonstrated the semantic sea-change which was transforming a statement of wartime belligerence in to an ominously despairing form of peacetime questioning. *Qui paiera?* ultimately proved to be a more accurate and enduring appraisal of the politics of reconstruction. It hinted both at the

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[116] ADS.10R26. Dommages de guerre d'Albert. Cantonal commission report, 1921.
[117] Silverman, *Reconstructing Europe* p.14.
[118] ADS.259PER109, *Le Progrès de la Somme*, 1 December 1918.

bankruptcy of post-war Europe, and of the denials and negations of responsibilities which were wholly consequent to it. The culture of suspicion, denunciation and accusation which manifested itself in the red zones of the 1920s, tended to mirror the politics of denial played out as they were on a far grander scale, as national politicians and economists throughout France, Europe and the United States sought to redefine the role of *la dette morale* in the politics of the post-war world.

From the very moment of the armistice, denial began to take hold. President Wilson's secretary of the Treasury, Carter Glass, suggested that Europe's needs in the wake of war were 'greatly exaggerated.'[119] Representatives of the Bank of England pressed for a post-war economic alliance with Germany and Austria against a French nation described by Lloyd George as 'exceedingly greedy.'[120] The British economist, Maynard Keynes, employed a ludicrously simplistic method of war damage calculation to encourage accusatory views of France as the arch-profiteer of the post-war world. Dividing the Third Republic's national wealth by the surface area of the devastated regions (as a percentage of the national territory), Keynes arrived at the conclusion that France had greatly exaggerated the losses it presented to the Versailles conference.[121] Conveniently ignored in this accusation of international profiteering was the highly industrialised nature of departments such as Nord and Pas-de-Calais; territories whose economic significance totally negated this nonsensical equation of geographical devastation with financial loss.[122] Recognising that the wind of political change was blowing towards a new Anglo-Saxon entente, French treasury representatives in New York reported that 'without saying it too loudly, the U.S. Treasury

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[119] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, p.81

[120] Silverman, *Reconstructing Europe* p.39.

[121] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, pp.107-8.

[122] 46% of war damages in Nord related to industrial devastation, compared to just 11% in Somme. ADS,265PER1, *La Voix des Ruines*, 9 April 1921.

believed France's financial mess was due in part to a lack of banking organisation and to the ignorance and egoism of our people.'[123] 'Nothing,' conclude Bernard and Dubief 'aroused the suspicion and even hostility of France's partners so much as the obstinate way in which her governments with almost the whole country's support, insisted upon Germany paying for the losses caused by the war.[124]'

It is of course, far beyond the scope of this study to provide a detailed examination of the politics of Versailles and its aftermath. But whilst the numerous revisions of the Treaty (by the end of 1920, 4 post-Versailles conferences had taken place in San Remo, Hythe, Boulogne and Spa) and the catastrophic economic consequences of the Ruhr occupation would each expose the total impracticality of making Germany wholly responsible for Europe's *bilan de guerre*, alternatives to this policy- from a French perspective- were hardly forthcoming. In article one of the *Charte des sinistrés* the Third Republic had of course sought to divorce the issue of reparations from the legal rights it was prepared to grant to each *sinistré*. At no point in the first half of the 1920s however, was the French economy sufficiently stable to turn ideological commitment into a political reality. Throughout 1920, when war damage dossiers were being compiled in response to the *Charte des sinistrés*, the Franc was experiencing the first of the three major crises which would befall it in a single decade. By December of that year, it had lost two thirds of its pre-war value against the dollar; inflation in April of 1920 had reached 600%, before slipping back to just over 400% at the end of the year.[125] Given France's dependence upon imported raw materials (particularly coal), the bleak economic climate of the initial post-war years necessitated an ever increasing reliance upon reparations as a financial panacea. Budgets of 'expenditures

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[123] Silverman, *Reconstructing Europe*, p.39
[124] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, p.94
[125] Ibid., pp.93-94.

recoverable from Germany in execution of the peace treaties' took place annually as an addition to the 'ordinary' budget, placing the entire system of war pensions and war damages for the devastated departments upon the fragile hope of German co-operation.[126] As Bernard and Dubief have argued, any rupture in reparations from Germany would thus leave a 'gaping hole' in the treasury accounts, 'considerably worsening the budget deficit.'[127]

The 'gaping hole' to which they refer, became an omnipresent feature in the balance sheet of Ministry for the Liberated Regions from the end of the 1920 and remained so throughout much of the decade. At the head of the ministry in 1920 was Louis Loucheur, an industrialist from the Nord and a former minister of commerce in Clemenceau's wartime cabinet. Loucheur's first attempt to balance his ministerial books ended in failure and a humiliating U-turn. Announcing in October 1920 that the forthcoming budget for the devastated regions would be cut from 20 billion francs to 12 (and at the same time implying that the scope of the *Charte des sinistrés* would ultimately be tailored to the size of German reparations), Loucheur had mobilised a unified response from town halls across the Western Front; the threat of resignations en-masse being sufficient to force a ministerial climb down. Four months later Loucheur sought an alternative method of cost-reduction by revising the coefficient in calculations of war damages. By the law of 17 April 1919, reparations for *sinistrés* who chose to resettle in the red zone included not only the pre-war value of their houses and possessions (as they stood on 30 June 1914), but an estimation of post-war costs for materials and labour. Inflationary trends during the Great War had driven up wholesale prices by around 400% at the time of the armistice;[128] thus, though inflation had continued to rise dramatically when the Somme's commissions began their evaluations in the summer of

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[126] Silverman, *Reconstructing Europe*, p.63.
[127] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, p.94.
[128] Ibid., p.93.

1919, coefficient 4 (a 400% addition to 1914 prices) was the figure employed in war damage evaluations. Necessary though it was to *fix* a coefficient in such calculations, the volatile nature of post-war inflation invariably gave war damage evaluations an artificial character. *Sinistrés* who received war damages from their commissions from mid-1919 to mid-1920 for instance, found themselves handicapped by a coefficient which was less than three quarters of the current rate of inflation. Six months later however, the beginning of the cyclical world economic crisis provoked the first period of post-war deflation in France, as prices on imported raw materials crashed. For some, this afforded a brief and wholly enviable situation in which the fixed coefficient was comparable to the true level of inflation.[129]

Year	Wholesale prices (average of 1913 = 100)	Coefficient employed in war damage evaluations in the Somme
April 1919	600	4
January 1920	447	4
June 1920	535	4
January 1921	414	(February 1921) 3,25
June 1921	333	3,25

Table 7: post-war inflation compared with coefficients employed in war damages, April 1919-June 1921 (sources for post-war inflation are: Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, pp.93-4 and Silverman, *Reconstructing Europe*, p.43. Figures on coefficient levels are drawn from *La Voix des Ruines*, April 1919-October 1921. Prior to February 1921, coefficient levels varied from department to department).

Though periods of inflation and deflation (and on top of this a myriad of localised coefficients based on the costs of transportation to villages bereft of railways or roads[130]) created immense complications in the process of reconstruction, Loucheur's solution of revision was far from welcome. In fixing a new coefficient at 3,25 across all of the ten devastated departments, the Ministry for the Liberated Regions was compensating for the overly generous coefficient it had employed at the beginning of the deflationary cycle. From

[129] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, p.93

[130] ADS.10R25, Dommages de guerre d'Albert. Initially, with the Bapaume road in ruins (the major highway stretching north-eastwards from Albert) villages such as Bazentin, and Pozières were forced paying far higher prices on raw materials than the chef-lieu itself.

the perspective of the ministry's economists, the new figure operated in a far safer position, someway below the rate of inflation. It was employed by Loucheur from February 1921 until October of the same year, though only in the final months of its existence did inflation drop to a level of near parity.

Denounced as 'unfair and indelicate' by the *Journal d'Amiens*[131] in February 1921, Loucheur had attempted to soften the blow of his economic policy by promising greater levels of state intervention over the profiteering of reconstruction firms. By policing the costs of labour and materials in the red zone, the minister pledged that the financial injury of a sub-inflationary coefficient could be negated; visiting Albert in April 1921, he stressed that *sinistrés* had no reason to worry about measures which had been taken in the common interest.[132] The promise proved impossible to uphold and the policy itself was short-lived. Red zone profiteers who 'descended like locusts on the ruined countryside'[133] may have been targeted by the minister when he introduced the 3,25 coefficient, but the state itself proved equally guilty in contributing to price hikes across the ruins. The benefits of the 1921 Treaty of Wiesbaden[134] would for instance, be negated by the ludicrously high import taxes imposed by the French customs office. *La Voix des Ruines* complained that the market price of a shipment of wooden provisional houses (made in Germany and destined for Nord and Somme) had increased from 10,000 francs to 23,000 francs once they crossed the border.[135] In Albert, the SRRL policy of selling reclaimed bricks back to *sinistrés* at twice the price

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[131] ADS.265PER1, *La Voix des Ruines*, 12 February 1921. *Le Journal d'Amiens* was quoted in this edition.
[132] ADS.KZ2864, report of the prefect, April 1921.
[133] Clout, *After the Ruins*, p.213.
[134] The treaty of Wiesbaden was drawn up in October 1921, following negotiations between Loucheur and Walter Rathenau. It permitted Germany to pay off part of its reparations bill through the supply of raw materials. See Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, p.110.
[135] ADS.265PER1, *La Voix des Ruines*, 10 December 1921.

recommended by the town council (in other words, increasing brick prices by 400% on 1914 values, but permitting their former owners only a 3,25 coefficient in compensation) [136], and the frequent rent increases imposed by the state upon its nissens and huts likewise suggested that short term policies designed to alleviate pressures on the treasury would always prevail over the financial concerns of the *isolés.*[137] Concerted pressure across the red zone finally forced the ministry to admit that a substantial error had been made in its calculations and to return to a more realistic method of evaluation.[138] In the Somme as a whole, 2,000 *isolés* had submitted their dossiers in this period and were saddled with woefully insufficient sums with which to rebuild their homes.[139] Triumphantly claiming responsibility for the campaign which had forced the ministry in to retreat, *La Voix des Ruines* called upon 'Prince' Loucheur ('you have never neglected an occasion to abuse your privileged position') to act on behalf of the *isolés* who had been ruined by the 3,25 coefficient and re-evaluate their claims with greater honesty.[140] By the mid-1920s (with Loucheur long departed from his post and the ministry itself dissolved) the issue of compensation for those whose dossiers had been systematically undervalued remained unresolved. Jammy Schmidt visited Albert in 1925 and was asked by the town's newly elected mayor, Émile Leturcq, how he intended to rectify the disastrous policies of his predecessors. Given the complexities of finding the final 25 billion francs with which public buildings could be built and the accounts of the *isolés* settled, the fate of the 2,000 occupied a low place in his priorities. 'Nothing' he responded, 'can be done at the present time.'[141]

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[136] AMA. Council minutes, 7 July 1920.
[137] ADS.KZ1024 Service techniques de reconstitution, 9 October 1921. The first attempt to increase rent on the red zone's provisional housing took place under Loucheur in October 1921..
[138] ADS.10R26, Dommages de guerre d'Albert.
[139] ADS.KZ1633, Visit of Jammy Schmidt to Albert, 25 September 1925.
[140] ADS.265PER1, *La Voix des Ruines*, 10 December 1921.
[141] ADS.241PER5, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 27 September 1925.

By the time of Schmidt's appointment in 1925, the resentment engendered by the politics of denial in the first six post-war years had given rise to protests and organised demonstrations across the red zone. Though the initial monetary crisis of 1920 had passed in a matter of months (allowing the franc to recover around 50% of its former value) *isolés* across the Western Front had been offered little respite. Loucheur's sub-inflationary evaluation policy had followed; the 1923 German demand for a moratorium on reparations had provoked Poincaré's costly occupation of the Ruhr (caustically described in the Socialist Party journal *Le Cri du Peuple,* as a policy whereby the premier gave *un boeuf pour avoir un oeuf*[142]) and the second post-war currency collapse of the decade. Unable to sustain its customary budget of 'additional expenses' the *Bloc National* government was prepared to allocate only 10% of the 1924 budget required to complete the reconstruction. Resorting to a typically black form of humour, *La Gazette de Péronne* provided little sense of comfort to the *isolés* when it told them that the government's financial policies were allowing the 'golden days'of nissens and provisional huts to continue.[143] Its sarcasm was not misplaced. Work sites which had been sporadically hit by insufficient government funds throughout the post-war years, ground to a total halt as liquid currency was gradually replaced with the wholly mistrusted currency of treasury bonds. Foreign workers were laid off. Some opted to be repatriated, others preferred to remain in the red zone, in the hope that work would resume on the building sites. Metal searching, the ever dependable red zone *métier* of collecting and selling the military debris from the fields, provided a financial stop-gap by which workers could sit out the period of unemployment.[144]

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[142] ADS.237PER8, *Le Cri du Peuple*, 11 march 1923.
[143] ADS.241PER4, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 12 April 1924.
[144] ADS.5Z17, Courcelette, Affaires Communales. Council minutes from June 1923 show that unemployed Algerians in the village used this profession as financial stop-gap. The council complained that a group of 12 'undesirables' were loitering around the fields and

The *isolés* themselves would be left increasingly dependent upon the government's own form of financial stop-gap, in the shape of treasury bonds, redeemable over a period of between four and ten years. Unwilling to release further funds of liquid currency to the devastated regions (the law of 1919 stipulated that a maximum of 41 billion francs could be in national circulation at any given time; this had been broken by 1925[145]) the *Cartel des Gauches* began to issue ODN certificates (ten year bonds) in ever greater numbers. Rejected by the state in 1871 as an unsuitable method of compensating *sinistrés* of the Franco-prussian war[146], treasury bonds would become the principal currency by which the Somme's remaining *isolés* carried out the reconstruction of their homes over the following 8 years. By 1926 they would constitute over 70% of the total reconstruction budget allocated to the Somme. Protest groups such the *Comité de Vigilance* in Albert were formed to fight against this progressive marginalisation of the war's poorest *sinistrés*. Fernand Belison, the mayor of Dernancourt and president of the *Comité de Vigilance* spoke at a 500 strong meeting of *isolés* in the following words:

> If we are obliged to accept the *papier déprecié*, at the same time we will be renouncing our right to the total reconstruction that we were promised...A campaign has been led against us by the French of the interior who have turned their backs on the liberated regions. They don't know enough about how we are forced to live. In the Midi they think that we have built palaces with our damages money. Trips should be organised so that they can come see the villages of the red zone. Once again this week, a *demi-lune* (nissen) has collapsed in the trench over which it was built, killing its owner underneath the debris. Whilst M.Briand is playing golf at Cannes he should bring his partner and make a golf party in the liberated regions, where there is no need to make holes for the golf ball. Then perhaps his partner would put more pressure on Germany to fulfil its obligations. The Midi has talked of the Panama of the liberated

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disarming explosives in the centre of the village.

[145] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, p.97.

[146] ADS.2K162, *Le Journal Officiel*, 7 September 1871. Deputy Raudot had suggested that indemnities take the form of bonds. Victor Lefranc responded for the government, stating that bonds would be of little use to *sinistrés* who needed immediate financial aid.

> regions and reproaches us for wasting the country's money, but the wine growers don't miss an opportunity themselves to claim help from the state each time there is hail storm.[147]

The brand of invective employed by the mayor would have come as no surprise to his audience. Since the armistice in 1918, politically active *sinistrés* had sought to encapsulate the *zone rouge/ France épargnée* relationship via the opposed images of bourgeois leisure (Aristide Briand and golf partner in Cannes) and red zone squalor (the collapsed nissen). By returning to this *idée fixe* of nationhood in 1925, it is arguable that Belison was merely drawing attention to the bitter truth which he sought to deny: *sinistré* identity by 1925 was wholly changed from that of 1918, just as the Somme itself barely resembled the desert landscape of the aftermath. Both socially and physically, the Somme's red zone had undergone a profound post-war evolution. Half of Albert's population were the inhabitants of redbrick houses by 1925; did they truly identify with the political struggles of the Great War's dwindling band of *sinistrés*? The red zone itself had shrunk from a barren swathe of 28,000 hectares little more than 500 hectares[148], most of it enveloping Thiepval, Beaucourt and Beaumont-Hamel; did the earth remain truly emblematic of social marginality, as it had seemed to the awed writers, journalists and tourists in 1918? Craters and shells may have played their inevitable role in shaping the imagery of the speech, but they were largely drawn from a memory of a landscape which had once defined a more homogenous social identity.

Perhaps the most striking sign of fracture in red zone identity involved the emergence of the symbolic in the visual landscape of the town. In May 1924, Albert finally erected its *monument aux morts*, employing a traditional form of republican imagery through the symbol

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[147] ADS.241PER4, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 31 December 1924.
[148] Hugh Clout, "La Reconstruction Rurale en Picardie" in *Reconstructions en Picardie* pp.124-5.

of the *coq*, perched on a *stèle*, inscribed with the words *Albert A Ses Enfants.*[149] Far more than a memorial to the fallen of 1914-18, this was also an endorsement of the Republic and its post-war paternalism. To those for whom the *bon père de famille* ideal had manifested itself in the form of rebuilt property, Michel Corday's bleak condemnation of the Great War *-pour avoir des réparations, on fait de l'irréparable-* could be safely denied. The re-emergence of a propertied class was pushing the reconstruction of Albert towards its symbolic phase. Increasingly in the council debates of the period, the town appeared to be looking in on itself as a site of memory, conceptualising the future through the prism of ideological legacy, rather than the more egalitarian vision of a completed edifice. This would prove to be as true of Leturcq's council of Radicals and Socialists as it had been of Pifre's Catholics and conservative Republicans. Symbols of political identity- located around the town's street names, or hinging upon the size, location and aesthetics of its principal public buildings- were taking precedence. The remaining *sinistrés* in the town, widows and *isolés* in the dilapidated nissens of *Le Village* were ceasing to be victims of the Great War altogether. It could be argued that they were becoming victims of reconstruction itself.

[149] Antoine Prost, "Monuments to the Dead" in Pierre Nora (ed.), Realms of Memory, vol..II p.313. Prost states that the Gallic cock was the most common form of memorial symbolism employed to 'mark the difference between Republican patriotism and out-and-out nationalism.'

CHAPTER SIX

RAISING THE GOLDEN VIRGIN: POLITICS IN THE SYMBOLIC PHASE, 1925-32

Seven years after the cessation of hostilities on the Western Front, la Place d'Armes remained largely bereft of its architectural identity. The derelict shell of the town hall, and the bars, pharmacies, bookshops and bakeries which surrounded it in 1914, had all been cleared by *équipes de déblaiement* and sold off to provide building material within the first two years of peace. By contrast, the remains of Notre Dame de Brébières underwent a more prolonged salvage operation, under the supervision of its chief architect, Louis Duthoit.[1] A large, provisional barn was constructed to store the *matériaux précieux* from the edifice and it wasn't until 1927 that irreparable rubble from the original church was crushed to make building sand and offered for sale to local building firms.[2] Post-war congregations gathered elsewhere in Albert. Notre Dame de Brébières took on the uniform aesthetic of the provisional town with a wooden structure, before a 20,000 franc gift from a private donor provided funds for a temporary brick building. This was a meagre offering by the standard of the basilica which had been lost, but it was far larger and more Christian in appearance than the gloomy nissens which sufficed as places of worship elsewhere in the canton. Replacing the town hall in Place d'Armes was a *cité administrative* located in Place Faidherbe. This included the provisional offices for the mayor (decorated with republican artwork sent by the

[1] AMA. Council minutes, 29 November 1920.
[2] AMA. Council minutes, 17 March 1927.

ministry for *beaux arts*[3]) the cantonal evaluation commission offices, the post office, the tax office, the salle des fêtes and lodgings for teachers at the *école normale* and *supérieure*.[4] Building by building, each of these wooden structures would disappear between 1925 and 1932; it is this process of dismantling specific vestiges of the provisional town and recreating the features which had defined pre-war Albert which interests us here. Reconstruction in its 'symbolic phase' was reconstruction in its most overtly politicised form: as Albert's aesthetic restoration neared its conclusion, concerted efforts would be made by the Left to revive in the collective memory echoes of a schismatic pre-war past. In the struggle to impose an enduring political legacy upon the fabric of the post-war town, Albert's Radicals would drive the underlying ideological tensions which had shaped the town's political identity since the creation of the Third Republic, to a point of conclusion.

The term 'symbolic phase' is employed here in reference to the final seven years of reconstruction in the Somme, between 1925 and 1932. In using it, we are by implication, imposing a conceptual model of reconstruction upon the 1918-32 era as a whole. There are clear limitations to this approach: the danger exists of distorting the past by imposing the semantics of periodisation upon a short span of post-war years; should we assume that a universal 'model' of reconstruction can apply to Albert's community as a whole? For certain *sinistrés*, the hardships of 1918 remained an aspect of their lives throughout the 1920s and much of the 1930s, and if marginality looms large as a *constant* of the rebuilding process, what value may be legitimately ascribed to the political and social landmarks which appear to map out the town's reconstruction in distinct periods? Despite the problems inherent in this approach, a certain clarity may be gained by looking upon the fourteen years stretching

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[3] AMA. Council minutes, 5 August 1921. Copies of works such as Condère's *Sermont du Jeu de Paume* adorned its walls.

[4] ADS.5Z75, Albert, affaires communales, SRRL report, 30 March 1925.

between the armistice of 1918 and the town's inauguration of 1932 in three separate phases. Not one of these phases could be said to be wholly distinct, but in each there are specific characteristics which warrant attention.

Between 1918-21, as we have seen, Albert's red zone (and indeed the Western Front as a whole) was in the 'emergency phase' of reconstruction. Overlorded by Paris based agencies such as the STPU, the phase was shaped at the beginning by the social problems inherent in a massive wave of return by refugees from exile in the interior, and at the end by the establishment of a physical infrastructure in provisional towns across the devastated regions. The second phase began with the opening of the cantonal evaluation commissions in July 1919 and stretched until 1925; we may term this the 'social phase' of reconstruction. Now, the reestablishment of a pre-war social order emerged as a structural element of reconstruction, permitting the town's commercial and industrial class to attain its inevitable position of predominance within the community. This process was largely shaped by the social and political network of friendships and business alliances which predated the war and re-emerged in the ruins. Through a web of mutual interest stretching between the municipal council and the cantonal evaluation commission, conservative-minded industrialists and *commerçants* had been able to protect their own, whilst taking revenge on the Radicals and Socialists who had sought to challenge the credibility of a post-war *union sacrée.* Through the official structures of war damage evaluation, reconstruction thus manifested itself as a process of social ordering, a feature which was evidenced by the continued existence of *Le Village* in 1932. Many of those who remained a part of its community of nissens and provisional huts at the end of the reconstruction era, had in a sense failed to persuade the evaluation commissions of their social worth or political reliability between 1919 and 1925.

In the 'symbolic phase' which followed on, the departure from the imagined homogeneity of red zone identity to a more natural state of political division continued; this time the dynamic was less the process of war damage evaluation (by and large completed by the mid-1920s) than the aesthetic development of Albert itself. In this third phase of the town's resurrection, the interplay between the functional and the ideological became manifest, with the focal point of the town's newly elected Radicals returning once more to the old rivalries of la Place d'Armes and the juxtaposed edifices of the town hall and Notre Dame de Brébières. Whilst the town hall was to acquire a wholly new facade, Notre Dame de Brébières was to be replicated in almost every detail, in a project undertaken by Louis Duthoit, the son of the original architect. Few objections would be raised to this on aesthetic grounds alone, but the sense of disquiet over the political meanings radiating from its visual narrative were palpable. In its shattered form, Notre Dame de Brébières was more an icon of the Great War than a symbolic repository of Catholic France. What would the new building represent? The resurrection of Albert as *la Lourdes du nord*, with much of its inherent ideological tension intact? Or the democratised space of a *vestige de guerre*, a site of national memory which conformed with the ideological contours of post-war identity? In many ways, the implicit meanings which could be ascribed to reconstruction as a cultural totality, appeared to revolve around this issue of revisiting and redefining Albert's pre-war past.

This points towards the brief awakening of a dormant anticlericalism in Albert, and to a feature of post-war reconstruction which has been wholly overlooked in the historiography of the period. The absence of debate on this issue is perhaps understandable: whilst the politics of pre-war anticlericalism are writ-large in the mythology of the Third Republic, its post-war echoes are by comparison, faint and incoherent. Anticlericalism as a credible political creed, belongs to the age of Ferry and Gambetta, Combes and Clemenceau; a cynical tool deployed

by Radicals and Opportunists to drive the 'Moral Order' Republic leftwards in order to enforce its legitimacy. By contrast, the dominant memory of post-war France, is undeniably that of a nation exhausted by bloodshed and consumed by the introspection of national mourning. It is the France of *les années creuses;* a cultural terrain in which the political fury which had once been engendered by the mutual enmity of Church and state appears strangely alien: *poilus* returned home and sought the brotherhood of *anciens combattants*, forums which promoted the mythology of war experience, engendered political extremism, but removed anticlericalism from the picture; towns and squares across the Republic acquired a new imagery in *monuments aux morts*, Republican statues which spoke only of mutual loss and thus provided a visual legitimacy to feelings of cultural homogeneity. The cult of Jeanne d'Arc thrived upon the safety of this post-war terrain: the prospect of a *fête nationale* which had horrified the Left prior to the War,[5] quickly became a post-war institution; a statue of the national saint was erected in Rouen, drawing visual inspiration from the mythology of the middle-ages, yet deriving its phraseology from the Panthéon.[6] Most crucially of all, the Great War exacted an incalculable price upon Radical identity. Of the original participants in the *union sacrée*, it was the unlikely marriage between Catholics and Radicals which endured, cutting the latter party adrift from their more natural Socialist bedfellows until the *cartel des gauches* in 1924, and undermining their credibility as a Left wing voice in post-war France. Little wonder then, that John McManners ends his exhaustive examination of anticlericalism in France with the watershed of war and the inevitable conclusion:

> When the war came, Socialists, Radicals, Royalists, nationalists and anticlericals- everyone- joined in the *union sacrée* against the invader. The heroism of the clergy

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[5] Emery and Morowitz, *Consuming the Past*, p.24.

[6] ADS.2K368, *Le Journal Officiel*, 14 July 1920. By article 3 of the loi instituant une fête nationale de Jeanne d'Arc, fête du patriotisme, her statue in Rouen was to carry the inscription: A JEANNE D'ARC LE PEUPLE FRANÇAIS RECONNAISSANT.

> and the Catholic soldiers, especially the officers of right-wing inclinations, and the sense of the overwhelming need for unity annihilated the vicious routine Republican anticlericalism of the previous generation. No Commune, no recriminations between politicians and churchmen followed the war of 1914-18...the old hatreds had burnt themselves out.[7]

Both McManners, and more recently, Claude Langlois, lay considerable stress upon a 'reconciliation in the trenches' between Catholics and seculars as one of the defining political legacies of war experience. Thus, as the likes of Edouard Herriot discovered to their cost in the mid-1920s, the ideology of anticlericalism no longer worked as the cement of a left-wing Republican union; old hatreds had been apparently smothered by the *fraternité* of mutual suffering in the hecatomb of 1914-18.[8] The argument holds strong in so much as anticlericalism never fully recovered its former footholds in the political imagination, but phrases such as 'reconciliation in the trenches' ignore the relativity of 'otherness' as a construct in political identity[9] and perhaps lose sight of the more subtle social functions of political division. As such, they take us only so far: we might ask why a war which successfully burnt out old hatreds was so unsuccessful in preventing the birth of new demons, via the spectre of a French Communist Party for example; why the spirit of reconciliation failed to halt an obsession amongst *poilus* with castigating non-combatants as national enemies; why, in the ruins of Albert, the fabric of both pre-war friendship and enmity was established with an ease which amounted to a denial of the moral paradigm of wartime France? Continuity, as Eric Leed has stressed, is the *sine qua non* of identity: absent though the old rhetoric of anticlericalism may have been from the post-war chamber of deputies, its

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[7] McManners, *Church and State, in France, 1870-1914* (London, 1972) p.174.
[8] Claude Langlois, 'Catholics and Seculars' in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past,* volume 1, Conflicts and Divisions, p.128.
[9] David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London, 1998), p.17.

political utility was not wholly extinguished.[10] Local communities, dislocated by four years of exile and devastation had to find ways of rebuilding and healing; the reinvention of political division was integral to this process, and in the ruins of Albert, the potential benefits of so acting made it all the more inviting. Instead of employing the term 'reconciliation' we may therefore be better served by thinking in terms of political utility. In the long term, the two may come to mean precisely the same thing, but in the post-war ruins where the political stakes for both Left and Right were extremely high, an absence of conflict cannot be taken to mean the presence of reconciliation; it merely points towards the risks involved in engendering rupture.

The risks of allowing the battle for the political spoils of the ruins to degenerate into the poisonous rhetoric of the pre-war era, were clear for both sides. The Somme's red zone press -predominantly Radical or Socialist by inclination- wholly avoided reference to the Catholic church as an erstwhile enemy in the first seven years of peace; the espousal of selective strands of Barrèsian mythology by *La Voix des Ruines* and *La Gazette de Péronne* in this period provided further testament to a political approach which had been radically altered by the complexities of devastation. Only by inventing a political identity for the red zone which was both unifying and culturally coherent, could the Left fully engage in its financial battle with *la France épargnée;* thus until the future of the *régions dévastées* had been largely secured, the recourse to an old ideology was something of a political luxury and could play no meaningful role in their discourse. The Church for its part, had everything to gain and nothing to lose by silence on the issue of former hatreds. Prior to the war, the political cause of the Catholic church in Albert had been played out in print through *Le Journal d'Albert:*

[10] Leed, *Combat and Identity*, p.62

'what is in the soul of a Radical?' It had asked readers on the eve of the Great War, 'it is the soul of a despot, of a king of savages, of a Mongol Khan.'[11] No attempt was made to resurrect this anti-Republican mouthpiece in the aftermath of war. The same post-war shroud of silence befell *Le Franc Parleur de Montdidier,* a vociferous advocate of anti-Semitic nationalism prior to the era of the Dreyfus affair and a hostile opponent of the Republic until the eve of the Great War. The absence of both points towards a collapse of the extreme Right, which took place throughout the ruined regions of the department.

Red zone politics -as the Church well knew- revolved around the issue of money, relegating old concerns to the political backwaters and forcing Catholics and seculars alike to agree on the most effective means of acquiring the financial spoils which had been promised in the *Charte des sinistrés.* The enduring nature of the vitriol directed from *la zone rouge* towards *la France épargnée* in the first 7 years of peace testified to the unity of this relationship. Instead of returning to potentially dangerous historical antipathies, Albert's Catholics tended to draw ranks with fellow *sinistrés*, dwelling upon a shared wartime legacy with Republican France in order to conceptualise their status as members of an *église dévastée* in the red zone of the Somme. The imagery employed on the front pages of the parish press in Albert made this position abundantly clear. A wood-etching for *Le Messager de Notre Dame de Brébières* in 1919 showed the republican coq standing astride a defeated German eagle amidst the ruins of the old church. Its head gazes backwards towards an image of a restored and replicated church, providing a vision of Albert's future which fused the traditions of Catholic France with the *bon père de famille* ideal of the Republic.

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[11] ADS.612PER17, *Le Journal d'Albert*, 25 may 1914.

Figure 20: The Republican coq adorns *Le Messager de Notre Dame de Brébières* (ADS.177PER5).

Thus, whilst the newly acquired Catholic faith in the paternalism of the Third Republic points towards the legacy of a 'reconciliation in the trenches,' at its core lay the ideology of money, or more explicitly, the total financial dependence of the Church upon the state. From a Radical (and perhaps Socialist) perspective, one of the more gratifying aspects of mass devastation was the strength of the state's position vis-à-vis the Catholic Church. In the

Somme alone, 176 churches had been totally destroyed;[12] categorised by red zone bureaucrats as *batiments publics*, the secularity of the term reminds us that places of worship had been property of the state since the law of separation in 1905. The success of their restoration would thus be shaped by the political factions which had largely manufactured the schism. Had the mindset of the Radical party been remotely similar to that of its pre-war self, then the *Charte des sinistrés* may well have acquired a different form. As it was, though the passage of the reconstruction law was presided over by the chamber's foremost anticlerical Radical in Clemenceau[13] (the *Charte des sinistrés* became law some months before the electoral triumph of the predominantly Catholic *Bloc National* in November 1919 and the eclipse of Clemenceau) it studiously avoided the legal loopholes which would have enabled anticlerical poisons to regain a meaningful grip on the politics of reconstruction. Made explicit in the *Charte des sinistrés* was the equal footing on which the rebuilding of religious and secular buildings was to take place: article 12 guaranteed that funds would be provided for France's churches to be rebuilt with the same architectural character and structural quality of those which had been destroyed.[14] This was a legal assurance of considerable symbolic weight; it placed the Republic in the role of protector of Catholic France's cultural heritage, renouncing the cultural vandalism which nationalists had believed to have acquired a covert legitimacy after 1905.[15] The Republic's newly acquired role as paternalistic protector of the Catholic church carried with it a considerable financial cost. In the Somme, this commitment entailed

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[12] Jean-Charles Cappronnier, "Les églises reconstruites après la Grande Guerre" in *Reconstructions en Picardie*, p.153

[13] Ibid., p.155. Clemenceau had not wholly approved of the conciliatory nature of Aristide Briand's law of separation between Church and State in 1905, and had hinted a more radically anticlerical law would follow. Forty fellow Radicals likewise supported the notion that the law was only provisional.

[14] ADS.2K361, *Journal Officiel*, 18 April 1919.

[15] McManners, *Church and State*, p.166. The law of 13 April 1908 did not oblige communes to carry out repairs on the religious buildings they had acquired by the law of separation., As such 'communes sometimes neglected repairs or connived at vandalism.' Maurice Barrès would make his opinions clear on this issue in *La grande pitié des églises en France*.

an average cost per church of approximately 300,000 francs.[16] Albert's own church, Notre Dame de Brébières was the exception to this rule. The immense scale of its *beffroi*, the 1 kilogram weight of gold leaf employed in the statue of the golden Virgin and the intricate mosaic work on its front facade had spiralled construction costs at the beginning of the century to 3 million francs. Its post-war reconstruction entailed a 13 million franc expenditure; making it the most expensive single edifice (beyond those designated as *monuments historiques)* to be rebuilt in Picardie.[17] To provide an alternative comparison, the *dommages de guerre* afforded to the church was almost half the size of the 1921 *emprunt sur Albert*, which had enabled over 500 homes to be rebuilt.

Though 'reconciliation' made considerable sense to all sides of the political spectrum in the initial stages of Albert's restoration, it became progressively less tenable thereafter.

Increasingly, politics in the red zone became enmeshed in the aesthetic dimension of reconstruction and steadily exposed the artificialities of post-war *ententes*. With the creation of every new street in Albert, there existed opportunities for those with a political stake in the town to impress their ideological stamp upon its developing visual identity. Precisely how the politics of symbols unfolded in Albert can be gleaned through an examination of its street names and the steady process of baptism and re-baptism they underwent in the 1920s. Street names, as Daniel de Milo has asserted, are a crucial aspect of our 'linguistic environment.' They are sites of memory, performing a highly ideological function. [18] Devastation -as the

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[16] This is based upon two churches of typical size and character in Albert's canton. Thiepval's church cost 298,950 francs when rebuilding began in 1931. In 1933 Authuille's rebuilt church cost a total of 300,300 francs.

[17] Jean-Charles Cappronnier, "Les églises reconstruites après la Grande Guerre" in *Reconstructions en Picardie* p.160.

[18] Daniel de Milo, "Street Names" in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past,* Volume III: Traditions, p.365. De Milo writes: 'Semantics in inevitably political. Our linguistic environment has incalculable ideological effects, and what is more, that environment can be manipulated.'

stark denomination of ruesA, B, C, etc. in the provisional town eloquently demonstrate-signified the death of Albert's linguistic environment. As such, post-war baptisms were all about constructing a narrative which dealt coherently with the collective memory of Albert's pre-war past, whilst ensuring a feeling of harmony with the specific ways in which the town's post-war social space was to be exploited. That Albert was by the mid 1920s, a pilgrimage site with a dual identity, attracting tourists and mourners to its secular vestiges of war and Catholic worshippers to their traditional position of prayer before *la statue miraculeuse*, was not lost on the political factions in the council. Ultimately, it was the older, more divisive form of pilgrimage which shaped the discourse on street names; the creation of an appropriate linguistic backdrop to the street-theatre of Catholic procession emerged as a key feature of debate for both the Left and Right.

With the triumph of Pifre's alliance of Catholics and right wing Republicans in the 1919 municipal elections, the process began. In Albert's 'linguistic environment', representations of the town's historical legacy reached back from the living memory of the pre-war era, to the mid-seventeenth century, though remaining thematically rooted around the significance of *local* individuals. Philippe Corette (mentioned in council minutes as a *bourgeois d'Albert*) had defended the town against the Spanish in the Thirty Years War of 1618-48 and was duly venerated for his courage in July 1924; the lives of Jean Baptiste Lamarck (the eighteenth century naturalist, born in nearby Bazentin) and Jean Guyon, a late eighteenth century surgeon from Albert, were likewise celebrated through street names. So too were those of five late nineteenth century mayors. In the very centre of Albert, the road leading north from the Place d'Armes acquired the name of Anicet Godin, honouring the late abbé of Notre Dame de Brébières and arch-opponent of the Republic during the anticlerical battles which

had preceded the Great War.[19] Two other candidates for street names were also submitted and passed by Pifre's council in 1924 : the cities of Bordeaux and Birmingham were honoured as *villes-marraines* of Albert, for their years of fund-raising on behalf of the town.[20]

Figure 21: The rebuilt Rue de Bapaume became Rue de Birmingham in the mid-1920s. (ADS.2FI2161).

With the exception of the abbé Godin (whose response to the separation between church and state in 1905, had been to enjoin his congregation to pray for another Bonaparte to rescue France from the anticlerical clutches of the Republic[21]), not one of these names could be construed as being remotely hostile to the town's Left wing factions. Albert's contested Catholic past was remembered, but numerically at least, secular men of science and medicine

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[19] AMA. Council minutes, July 1924.

[20] Bordeaux was Emile Leturcq's city of exile in the final months of the war. By 1921 the city had raised 200,000 francs on behalf of the town. Birmingham's link with Albert was based upon the death of soldiers from the city in 1915; a 20,000 franc donation was sent as a Christmas gift in 1921. Albert's hospice was also part-funded through the efforts of its *ville-marraine*. AMA. Council minutes, December 1921.

[21] Archives Diocésains D'Amiens, DA 175 Albert, *La Quinzaine Paroissal*, December 1905.

(Lamarck himself was a precursor to Charles Darwin and encountered similar hostilities from the Church), had attained a more visible presence than men of the Church. Past mayors were honoured by the council, but these choices appeared to have been informed by a desire for a chronological narrative, rather than a particular ideological statement. Street names such as Bordeaux and Birmingham were of course wholly neutral, possessing the same appeal to all sides of the political spectrum; indeed Emile Leturcq's council would continue the policy of honouring *villes-marraines* by adding the Chinese town of Tien-Tsin to the street-scape later in the year.

Perhaps the true significance of these choices resides in what is hidden, rather than what is present. In accordance with the regionalist ideal, Albert was prepared to remember only itself and a handful of villages around it. The wider meanings of Republican identity may have been hinted at through the inclusion of scientists in its roll of honour, but the history of the Third Republic itself appeared as a blank page, as indeed did the Great War of 1914-18. Beyond the safe parameters of *la petite patrie*, there was no concept of the nation as a political manifestation. Continuity had been sought through a largely apolitical past. This glaring shroud of silence around the linguistic environment of Albert would be highlighted in the second half of the 1920s, when Emile Leturcq's *Union des Gauches* sought to redress the political balance.

It was in fact, more or less the first act of Leturcq's victorious *Union des Gauches* to address the issue of ideological legacy. Elected in May 1925, when the new council met at the end of that month, 3 new street names were proposed by the Radical councillor, M. Leriche: Emile Zola and Anatole France, the arch-republican literary figures in the pre-war *kulturkampf* with

Barrès and Maurras, and the Socialist martyr *par excellence*, Jean Jaurès.[22] All three had been prominent *Dreyfusards*. Zola, in particular, had been stigmatised by Barrès during the Dreyfus trial as Catholic France's anti-hero, a *déraciné* who was incapable of grasping the spiritual essence of *la France éternelle*.[23] Zola's role in the Dreyfus affair had of course been shaped by the polemic of *J'accuse*, but other titles from his extensive literary career were equally attractive to Albert's Radicals. Six years before the publication of *J'accuse*, Zola had written *Lourdes*, a novel which played upon fin-de-siècle Pasteurian concepts of filth and cleanliness[24], by depicting the town's miraculous cure as 'a horrible slop...an abominable soup of ills...the miracle was that anyone emerged alive from this human slime.' The spiritual dimension of the pilgrimage movement was likewise treated with a caustic secularity, rendering Zola 'an emblem of the satanic nature of anticlericalism.'[25] By adding the likes of Zola to Albert's localised assortment of benefactors, mayors and *savants*, the ideological shift from the self-contemplative ethos of regionalism, to the sharp-edged political domain of the Third Republic was unmissable. So too was the calculated distortion of *la Lourdes du nord.*

With the reconstruction of new streets, more names followed between 1925 and the inauguration of 1932, each of them serving the singular purpose of evoking *un passé laïque.* By the time of the 1931 census, Rue Emile Zola extended in to the newly baptised Rue Pasteur, to further strengthen affiliation with a Positivist vision of France, shaped by science and divorced from Catholic faith in the panacea of saintly intervention. Albert also possessed the ubiquitous Avenue de la République and a Rue Victor Hugo. Alongside these mainstays

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[22] AMA. Council minutes, 22 may 1925.
[23] Carroll, *French Literary Fascism,* pp.28-29.
[24] Harris, *Lourdes,* pp.304-338.
[25] Harris, *Lourdes,* pp.336-7.

of Republicanism there were also street names in honour of René Waldeck Rousseau, whose ministry of 'Republican Defence' had directed and overseen the pardoning of Dreyfus and the anti-Catholic law on associations.[26] Again, the name was chosen as a focal point with specific meaning to the pilgrimage crowds: through this act of legislation, Waldeck-Rousseau had facilitated the dissolution and humiliation of the controlling figures within the pilgrimage movement: the Paris based order of the Assumptionists. A road was also found to honour the name of the Opportunist Jules Ferry, the architect behind the programme of secularisation in education, whose reforming work was symbolised by the stripping of crucifixes from classroom walls across the Republic. With particular malice, the council brought the spirit of Ferry's campaign to bear on its own streets, by de-baptising Rue du Grand Calvaire and replacing it with the name of the militant anticlerical Paul Bert.[27] Secularity dominated Albert's rebuilt past by 1932 , reflecting a singular determination amongst Radicals to celebrate the most profound cultural schism of pre-war France. Within its linguistic environment, the dominant position had shifted from the apolitical and historically curious, to the key players of the Dreyfus era and the politicians whose reputations had been established through the wounds they had inflicted upon Catholic France.

Street names were not the only battleground for the possession of Albert's political past. There was perhaps, a profound inevitability that the town's pre-war tensions would re-emerge amidst post-war debates on architecture and town planning. Prior to the massive German bombardment of the town in September 1914, Albert's kulturkampf had acquired visible resonance through the architectural stand off between the bastion of *la France laïque*

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[26] Mcmanners, *Church and State*, pp. 118-128. By the July 1901 law on associations, religious corporations were to apply to state for authorisation. A refusal would entail their dissolution and sale of their property.

[27] Mcmanners, *Church and State*, p.48. Paul Bert was Minister for Education and Religious Affairs in Gambetta's short-lived ministry of 1881-1882

(the town hall) and Notre Dame de Brébières in Place d'Armes. Keen to steer post-war Albert towards a path of ideological reconciliation, Abel Pifre had undertaken what could be described in political terms as a 'genial' retreat. Under the pretext that the new town hall would prove unsuitably large for the limited space of Place d'Armes, Pifre's town plan in 1921 envisaged that the future edifice would be removed from the town's centre altogether. Repositioning itself in Place Faidherbe, its principal facade would face away from Albert, towards its distant cantonal villages. With the triumph of Leturcq in 1925, pressure mounted from the Left for the project to be revised. Anticlerical voices in the council session of July 1925 demanded that Pifre's 'highly political' decision to withdraw a secular building from the visual space of a Catholic church be revoked and the town hall be returned to its pre-war location.[28] The extra financial cost for this project was estimated at 150,000 francs, due to the necessity of purchasing land in Place d'Armes from *sinistrés,* and of demolishing two recently constructed commercial and domestic properties. The potential political cost was greater. The politically informed act of destruction to satisfy an anticlerical lobby, in a period of ever deepening economic crisis, would have provided the national Catholic press (such as *L'Écho de Paris)* with endless fuel for its attacks on the prodigality of 'Panama' and *la reconstruction ruineuse.* With some reluctance, Leturcq's conclusion that the cost of returning the town hall to its former home was unacceptable, gained the support of his council. The future town hall would be built in Place Faidherbe, though at its opposite end, in order to face both the town of Albert and its historic opponent, the Church.[29]

By no means however, was this the final word in the post-war dispute between Albert's anticlericals and the Church. During the next seven years, tensions would sporadically flare

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[28] AMA. Council minutes, July 1925.
[29] AMA.Council minutes of 31 October 1925 and 28 December 1925.

over the issue of speed, as the council pressured the mayor to ensure that secular Albert - symbolised in an architectural form by its school buildings, town hall and hospital- was rebuilt before the golden virgin reclaimed her place on the tower of Notre Dame de Brébières. Council minutes show that upon Leturcq's announcement in July 1925 that Albert would join a *société coopérative diocésaine des églises dévastées*, in order to facilitate the rebuilding of the church, M.Leriche responded that he had no wish to see Notre Dame de Brébières built before Albert's municipal buildings; M.Reimann likewise declared that it was imperative that the hospital be built before the church; M.Meyer expressed his personal astonishment at the haste with which the mayor wished to commence the restoration of the edifice.[30] The ideological squabble over public space would retain much of its former energy until the eve of the town's inauguration. In October 1927, M.Reimann continued to express his displeasure at the relative speed of church construction vis-à-vis the town's secular buildings. Reimann observed that 'it had been well understood that the hospital would be built at the same time as the church, yet it seems that the church is already in process of reconstruction, whilst the hospital has not been started.'[31] In something of an act of conciliation, the chief architect of Notre Dame de Brébières forewent 1% of his expenses and presented the town with a cheque of 10,000 francs for the hospital.[32] Again, in 1931, the argument was resumed. By this time, the church tower had been completed and was merely awaiting the return of the Golden Virgin. Reacting to news from the *société coopérative* that the cost of the tower had risen to 639,000 francs (a sum which the cooperative now wished to claim from Albert), half of the council refused to vote the extra funds; a second round of voting was required before it was agreed that the town's most famous landmark -and one of the Great War's iconic images- gained the municipal funding it required. In an atmosphere of

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[30] AMA. Council minutes, July 1925
[31] AMA. Council minutes, October 1927.
[32] AMA. Council minutes, 3 December 1927.

increasing tension, ten votes (almost half of the councillors present at the session) were then recorded in favour of a move to uphold the town's pre-war ban on religious processions on the day of the church's inauguration. Only through the mayor's plea that the national image of Albert would be severely damaged by its dogged anticlericalism, was the completion of Notre Dame de Brebieres endorsed by the council as an event of legitimate religious observance and celebration. When the benediction of the church finally took place, the mayor, Dr.Verrier (himself a Radical, who had replaced Leturcq following his death in 1930) took no chances with the prevailing mood of anticlericalism. Fifty extra gendarmes were requested from the prefect to police the crowds in the event of a counter-demonstration.[33]

What did this all mean? Had anticlericalism resumed its position at the centre of Albert's political life? Certainly, it is tempting to view the endgame of reconstruction through this prism: once the political utility of imagining the Somme as *la zone rouge* and the interior departments as *la France épargnée* had exhausted itself, was it not logical for more traditional divisions to reassert themselves? Would this not explain the apparent momentum towards the politics of anticlericalism in the late 1920s? This may well be the case. But whilst anticlericalism had most certainly resurfaced, it is difficult to view the noise emanating from Albert's Radicals as anything other than a political luxury afforded by the spoils of an increasingly successful restoration. As such, this version of pre-war vitriol was a distorted, unconvincing echo of its former self. Anticlericalism had appeared in its most powerful and coherent form at the turn of the century when it mobilised its supporters against the counter-identity of Catholic France. In Albert, it appeared that the Radicals wished street names and buildings to enact what the crowds no longer wished to express: namely a

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[33] AMA. Council minutes, March 1931 and A.D.Somme, KZ141, Céremonies Publiques en 1931. *Sous-préfet* to the prefect, 17 April 1931.

passionate, political identification with the secular cause. Absent here was the crucial component of an openly hostile Catholic church. Far from embracing the Radical reinvention of Church-state division, the church in Albert seemed content to exploit the commercial opportunities acquired by its post-war duality. Catholic pilgrims returned to Notre Dame de Brébières to pray before *la statue miraculeuse*, but in far greater numbers flocked the secular pilgrims, for whom Albert was the town of *la vierge penchée*, not *la Lourdes du Nord.* David Lloyd asserts that at the height of the battlefield tourist boom, some 300 weekly visitors were paying homage at memorial sites such as Thiepval.[34] This trade would sustain 20 hotels and restaurants in post-war Albert, as well as over 100 bars; some with adoptive names such as *Café des Alliés* and *Hotel de la Paix*. Inevitably, this change in the uses of Albert's space and iconography, would be mirrored in Notre Dame de Brébières itself. Though its exterior mirrored its pre-war identity, the interior space (in particular the St. Michel chapel) was dedicated to the memory of the 'defenders of the region', thus emphasising the church's new role as a military shrine of international memory, Christian or otherwise. The sea-change in functionality had a commercial basis. Thoroughly accustomed to a relationship with tourists which was as commercial as it was spiritual, *Le Messager de Notre Dame de Brébières* carried the following appeal to the cosmopolitan mix of tourists who fell within its orbit:

> The whole world has heard of the leaning virgin of Albert. Newspapers, reviews and postcards have given her a universal fame. But the final word must not rest with hatred. Popular piety demands the rebuilding of Notre Dame and the *curé* of Albert holds out his hand for this reason...he appeals to families in mourning: the XIV corps has left thousands of heroes in the fields around Albert. Irish and Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders, English and Scottish fell en-masse in our fields. He prays for them and would like to make his church a temple to their memory, to engrave on the walls, the glorious names of all the courageous men.[35]

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[34] Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism*, p.103

[35] ADS.177PER5, *Le Messager de Notre Dame de Brébières*, 1913-1927

The assimilation of Notre Dame de Brébières within the landscape of remembrance, and beyond this, within the mythology of Republican France, draws attention to a post-war Catholic ethos, which in acknowledging secular morality and embracing Republican patriotism, had shifted significantly from the Assumptionist counter-vision of *la Lourdes du nord.* This being so, what was the motivational force driving Albert's Radicals to revive their ancient hatreds against Notre Dame de Brébières? Undeniably, the ideological coherence of the anticlerical position had been negated by war and reconstruction, but its utility in the more introspective process of localised score-settling remained steadfast. Just as the medium of war damage evaluation in the social phase of reconstruction had enabled Catholics and conservatives to informally mobilise against their traditional opponents, the symbolic phase presented Radicals with the opportunity of exacting a reciprocal revenge.[36] If this late 1920s shift from the wider agenda of red zone politics suggests a descent into municipal pettiness, it was nonetheless significant in establishing the terms of coexistence between erstwhile rivals in the post-war town. Albert's Radicals may no longer have earnestly sought the disintegration of the Catholic church in France, but their acquiescence to the ideological truce forged by war had its boundaries, and political pride dictated that they be writ-large in the fabric of the town: Republican paternalism would realise the expensive rebuilding of Notre Dame de Brébières, but it could not be seen to invite or endorse the reinvention of *la Lourdes du nord.*

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[36] Thus, it is unsurprising to discover that Louis Cretel was one of the councillors who voted against providing funds for the completion of the statue of the golden Virgin. Cretel, like his brother Georges had earlier paid the price for their alliance with Leturcq with low war damage evaluations by the cantonal commissions. Louis Cretel was, in consequence, unable to leave his nissen in *Le Village*. He died there in 1931 and was honoured by a street name soon after

Cumulatively, council debates on Albert's architectural features, on the geographical location of its buildings and the ideological tone of its linguistic space, highlight two characteristics of politics in the symbolic phase. Firstly, the very nature of debate suggests that reconstruction was increasingly perceived as a means of defining and sustaining cultural identity; that in effect devastation had spawned a priceless political asset in an age when cultural alienation did much to engender extremism in the Third Republic. Paradoxically, the very fact that issues surrounding street names loomed so large in the political imagination of Albert's Radicals and Socialists underscores a crisis of identity which had enveloped both parties by the mid-1920s. Having cut the Radicals adrift from the Left, by their withdrawal from the *union sacrée* in 1917, the Socialist party would succumb to the pain of a similar schism at the congress of Tours in 1920. For the Left as a whole, these scars would remain open until the brief period of reconciliation during the Popular Front experiment in the mid-1930s. Serge Bernstein asserts that for the Radicals in particular, the ideological wasteland of the 1920s appeared particularly bleak:

> What was the difference between a nationalist such as Barrés and a Radical who shared his party's views on France's war aims or armed intervention in Russia? In so far as social and political policy were concerned, the distinctions became so slight that upstanding Radicals appeared together on a common list with Barrès in the 1919 elections. The only major issue still separating large numbers of radicals from the right was secularism.[37]

Did the identification of Albert with the politics of an anticlerical past genuinely amount to a re-emergence of cultural division as the political heart beat of post-war life? Perhaps not. This was merely the way in which the ideological *bilan de guerre* of 1914-18 manifested itself. Just as the usage of street names evoking *la petite patrie*, had offered a sense of

[37] Berstein, "The Radical Socialist Party during the First World War" in Patrick Fridenson (ed.), *The French Home Front 1914-18*, pp.43-7.

cultural continuity to Abel Pifre's right-wing council, Albert's *Union des Gauches* was seeking similar assurances by returning to a Republican past which was rooted in the Radical golden age of the Dreyfus affair. The rebuilt streets of Albert would ultimately bear silent witness to two very different political expressions of the same idea; the unspoken common ground which existed between Left and Right being reinforced by a mutual silence on the Great War itself. Albert's collective past could encompass regional notables from the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; it could likewise embrace the extremes of the Dreyfus era which had been played out on a national stage, but no linguistic space could be found in the town to remember the collective trauma of invasion and occupation in 1914. Not until later in the 1930s, when the Somme press contained progressively bleak reports of German rearmament, was a Rue des Otages added to the street-scape, to provide a permanent linguistic memorial to the unheroic, unhappy civilian experiences of daily life in a war zone.

The symbolic phase thus presents itself as a complex and highly political synthesis of collective remembrance and collective denial. During this final phase of Albert's reconstruction, the symbolic vestiges of pre-war France were restored or reinvented; through reinvention, it is apparent that Albert's post-war community invested faith in the idea that the most painful ideological compromises of the Great War could be exorcised and forgotten.

Reconstruction Becomes Mythology: Albert in 1932

The symbolic phase reached its point of apotheosis in 1932. It was in August that Albert's 'renaissance' received its formal endorsement, when Albert Lebrun, President of the Third Republic, visited the town to confer upon it the *Croix de la Légion d'Honneur*. The ceremony had been delayed by three months due to the assassination of Lebrun's

predecessor, Paul Doumer, by an exiled White Russian.[38] For Lebrun, the return to Albert as head of state had a deeply personal significance. His previous visit had taken place in 1918, when as the minister for the Liberated Regions, he had encountered 'misery and death' in a post-war wasteland consisting of a handful of ex-army nissens. Destiny, he observed, had reserved for him the great joy of returning to admire a town which was happier and more vivacious than ever before.[39]

The physical contrast was extraordinary; nowhere more so than in la Place d'Armes where Notre Dame de Brébières had risen from its wartime dereliction to return in the same form and location as its pre-war self. Replicated on the exterior facades in every detail save some relatively minor mosaic work, the church in 1932, was awaiting the municipal funds which would ensure the completion of its interior.[40] Around the church, la Place d'Armes had a less familiar form. The town hall was gone and fewer shops and bars had been rebuilt; it had also acquired a more attractive circular shape, which permitted access to the town centre from a greater number of roadways. A short walk southwards from Place d'Armes, down the commercial Rue Jean d'Harcourt, brought the large, open market square of Place Faidherbe in to view; located here was the *école supérieur des garçons* and the imposing shape of the rebuilt town hall. Built at a cost of 4 million francs, the new building (far larger than its pre-war equivalent) rivalled the church in both height and grandeur. Designed in a *style flamand*, the town hall also possessed a *beffroi*, which chimed the quarter hour mark with a decidedly un-flemish *carillon de Westminster*. The third of Albert's dominant architectural edifices was located to the north of the town in the elegant, spacious Place de la gare.

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[38] AMA. Council minutes, April 1932. The ceremony was due to take place on 16 May 1932.
[39] ADS.241PER12,*La Gazette de Péronne*, 3 August 1932.
[40] This would prove to be a long wait. War damages for the church were still outstanding when France was occupied in 1940.

Commissioned by *la compagnie du nord*, the station was designed by a founding figure of Regionalist architecture, Gustave Umbdenstock. Though smaller than the church and town hall, here too was a *beffroi*, providing Albert with two secular rivals to a skyline once dominated by Notre Dame de Brébières. *La Lourdes du nord* of 1914 had succumbed to the more secularised aesthetics of *la ville des trois clochers* by 1932.

Regionalist architecture -undisputedly *le style officiel* of reconstruction across the *régions dévastées*- was present throughout Albert's rebuilt streets. Appealing to the desire of the Ministry of Fine Arts for a post-war aesthetic which hinted at continuity rather than rupture, and a mode of construction which was relatively economical, Regionalists courted political favour by insisting upon the employment of local building materials in the rebuilding of towns and villages across the Western Front.[41] Whether the net result of reconstruction in 1932 matched the self-promoting Regionalist vision of la *France rustique*, is perhaps debatable. Nevertheless, in Albert, where some 2199 homes had been rebuilt, street after street had acquired the attractive two-tone brickwork around window lintels and roof eaves, which were the trademark aesthetics of Regionalism in the Somme. Some homes proudly proclaimed the year of their reconstruction in their brickwork; others were baptised by their owners with sentimental names such as 'Enfin, Chez Nous' and 'Notre Abris.'

The August 'Fête de la Renaissance' drew thousands on to the streets. Triumphal arches and houses bedecked with flags marked the route of the cortège of departmental politicians and foreign guests in the morning of 1 August. The President and his entourage arrived by train later that day. The ceremony began at 9.30 with the arrival at the town hall of the *sous-Préfets* of Péronne and Abbeville, 2 departmental senators, mayors from Péronne and

[41] See Jean-Claude Vigato, *L'architecture régionaliste, France 1890-1950* (Paris, 1994)

the villages of Albert's canton and the Lord mayor of Birmingham. Floral tributes were laid at the *monument aux morts* and the British cemetery on the Route de Bapaume, before the cortège moved on to the rebuilt hospice, where the Lord Mayor of Birmingham received a key from a war orphan in recognition of his city's generosity as a benefactor to Albert. Two statues of former mayors were then unveiled in front of the town hall: Albert Toulet, the late nineteenth century industrialist and Emile Leturcq, whose death two years earlier had itself been marked by a major memorial ceremony.[42]

By the evening, canon fire from the 301st artillery regiment greeted the arrival of the President, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Minister for War, the Minister for Pensions, the British Ambassador, 2 former prefects of the Somme department and representatives of the French army. In the reception room of the town hall, the President was addressed thus by Albert's mayor, Dr. Verrier:

> Mr. President, in April, the inhabitants of Albert were happily anticipating the visit of Paul Doumer on 16 may. But A tragic destiny played its part and it seemed that a veil of sadness and mourning would shroud the ceremony today. But the venerable President, like his children on the battlefields, died as a hero and there is no need to cry over heroes, we admire them...
>
> ...Despite the devastation which our town has suffered on 7 occasions throughout the centuries, before the war we were one of the most prosperous communes in the department. Albert's industries had given the town a reputation which stretched far and wide. The worker possessed all of the robust qualities which come from a love of labour: tenacity and a perfect expertise in his specialised art, combined with an understanding of the march of progress... Iron in effect stood for the power and the wealth of Albert. And yet by a cruel irony, iron in 1914 was the cause of Albert's ruin and destruction, taking from our families 224 soldiers, 45 civilians...destroying our homes brick by brick. But the sinister sound of the canon had barely ceased to sound, when there awoke in the soul of each *Albertin,* the steadfast virtues that the war could never shake, and he brought back to life the schools, hospitals, the church and town hall, which all bore the stamp of his practical skills.

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[42] AMA. Council minutes September 1930.

But we would be overly infatuated with ourselves if we didn't attribute the successes of reconstruction to others. Without tools, even the most skilful worker is rendered powerless. And we know that these tools came from many sources, above all from France and its ministers who held out their helping hand in an immense effort...On this memorable day, we must also salute the memory of the town's former mayors who began the work of restoration and provided it with the vigour and energy which is the foundation of what we see today. The pre-war population of Albert was 7,000; now it is 8,500. These figures speak eloquently of Albert's future. And as the crowing glory of our work, in an historic visit, the President has helped to celebrate the apotheosis of Albert's renaissance.

The President responded:

> Amongst the tragic and glorious tales which have inscribed themselves in the lives of most of our towns in France across the centuries, I know not of a sadder one, given the tragedy which has constantly repeated itself, nor indeed of a more inspiring one, due to the heroic determination of your proud and noble town. One is reminded of the seven times in the long history of our nation when Albert's ramparts were breached and its houses destroyed. Seven times, it experienced the horror of devastation and its inhabitants lived through the pain of exile, but never was this tragedy so great as in the torment of the last four years of the Great War...all that had been the pride and fortune of a flourishing pre-war town was destroyed. Its public buildings, factories, 2,500 homes, its brand new church, proud of its youth and acclaim, gaily reaching out into the fresh blue sky, all this was lost, and in the tortured earth, there lay an indescribable mass mixed pell-mell with the gun shot...
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> Your population, sublime during the war, knew that it was vital to continue its admirable effort in peacetime. Nothing could discourage the population from rebuilding. This valiancy and determination, which astonished those who saw it in 1914, has never ceased in the post-war years. It is a salutary example of what an energetic people can do when their hearts are filled with an ardent love of their native earth.[43]

The recourse to mythology was not unexpected. Much of the content of their speeches followed a well-worn formula, unsurprising perhaps, given the vast number of inaugurations and benedictions which were taking place across the old front-lines of the Western Front in the symbolic phase of reconstruction.[44] In Albert alone, this was the sixth major public act of

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[43] ADS.241PER12, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 3 August 1932.
[44] Thierry hardier, "Les rituels de la reconstruction" in *Reconstructions en Picardie*, pp. 99-113.

celebration or remembrance to have taken place since the inauguration of the town's *monument aux morts* in May 1924. Ceremonies to mark Albert's 'rise from the ruins' in 1925, the laying of the foundation stone at the hospice in 1926, Leturcq's funeral in 1930 and the inauguration and benediction of Notre Dame de Brébières in 1931, had each invoked the brand of imagery which mythologised both the Great War and the reconstruction process. By placing Albert's destruction in the context of a narrative stretching back to the safe cultural terrain of the middle ages, the defining features of the Great War and its aftermath were softened, if not altogether lost. Thus construed, reconstruction could be imagined in an episodic form, as a mere chapter of *regional* history, defined more by a sense of historical continuity than by social rupture or psychological dislocation. The narratives which emerged from these ceremonial events paid due lip service to the triumph and the industry of the modern worker in rescuing Albert from the torment of industrialised warfare, but the underlying theme of trial, and then redemption through loyalty to the native soil, remained wholly infused with a Barrèsian mystification of *La France éternelle*. In harmony with this theme was *Le Journal d'Amiens*. At the benediction of Albert's church, the paper's patriotic eulogy served to remind readers that 'it is one of the characteristics of the French that throughout the centuries we have been able to arise from the disasters which have de-figured our country...to see the rebirth of the church eloquently affirms the spiritual values of ancient Picardie and indeed of France as a whole.'[45] From an architectural perspective, the religious ceremony of 1931 and the secular celebrations of 1932 may have been different, but the underlying mythology was essentially the same. The past honoured here belonged neither to the Right nor the Left, but to a culturally homogenous French nation; the peculiar traits of Frenchness were derived neither from religious mysticism, nor revolution, but in war and the

[45] ADS.KZ141, Céremonies Publiques en 1931.

collective determination to transcend the misery of its aftermath. Reconstruction thus emerged as the guide *par excellence* to the spiritual unity of the French past.

There were of course, alternative ways of viewing the Western Front, even in 1932. Eugen Weber reminds us that foreign tourists -unconditioned by the cultural certainties offered by the symbolic phase- were inclined towards a sense of shock at the 'devastation' which remained visible to the eye. He points out that 10% of the homes and factories raised across the devastated regions in 1914-18, were never rebuilt, and that court cases involving the claims of unfortunate *sinistrés* likewise dragged on until peace was shattered once more in 1939.[46] Weber's pessimism towards reconstruction is, of course, largely informed by the meanings of a wider discourse on *les années creuses*, and reveals a clear temptation to discard the positives of the Third Republic for a version of history which provides an appropriate backdrop to the catastrophe of 1940. Nevertheless, it warrants discussion. Certainly, for all its successes, Albert bore some of the ugly scars to which Weber draws our attention. Located on the margins of Albert was the social repository of the reconstruction era. Consisting of 129 nissens and huts (only 9 less than had been erected there at the end of the Great War), *Le Village* was the stark social space in which the limitations of Republican paternalism were revealed.[47] For those who inhabited Albert's last provisional quarter, living conditions remained almost as primitive as they had in 1919: not until 1931 did the council provide funds for drinking water installations to be created in each road of *Le Village.* [48] Amongst the 389 inhabitants who appear on the 1931 census, some had resided there for more than ten years, having been shifted from hut to hut as former residents moved out of *Le Village* and in to their reconstructed homes. The 1931 census returns shows that one such

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[46] Weber, *The Hollow Years*, p.16
[47] ADS.2MI_LN3/2, census returns 1931.
[48] AMA. Council minutes, 29 June 1931.

resident, Edouard Delannoy occupied a hut on Rue G with a family of 11; previously this had been occupied by only two people. He remained in the provisional settlement in 1936 (now reduced to 76 huts), by which time he shared his living space with 13 others[49]. Elsewhere in Albert, huts and nissens remained a visible feature of the new town as former owners maintained them in the gardens of their own property and rented them out privately.[50] Though the council chose to symbolically mark the end of the reconstruction era by prohibiting the construction of new huts in the town centre[51], it too continued to restore and repair any empty huts which remained, responding to a demand for provisional shelter which remained strong, until the out break of the Second World War.[52]

And beyond Albert, there lay the village of Thiepval. Here, Sir Edward Lutyens's massive memorial to the 'Missing of the Somme' was unveiled by the Prince of Wales on the day which followed Albert's own inauguration. In August 1932, the wording on the monument arguably possessed an alternative meaning, reading as something of an epitaph to the village itself. Thiepval, at the end of the symbolic phase, remained very much a 'missing' village. Prior to the purchase (and privately financed restoration) of the commune's entire red zone by a single landowner in 1930[53], a decade of political infighting between returnees and absentee landowners had determined that Thiepval's earth remained largely unchanged from

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[49] ADS.2MI_LN3/2, Albert, census returns 1936.
[50] ADS.5Z76, Albert, Affaires Communales 1926-31. M.Ducellier rented his provisional hut out to the *garde champêtre*, following the completion of his home in 1927.
[51] ADS.5Z78, Albert, Affaires Communales. The council banned the construction of new huts in May 1932.
[52] ADS.5Z77 & 5Z80. Albert, Affaires Communales. In march 1933, the mayor of Albert (Dr.Verrier) wrote to the *sous-préfet* asking that an inhabitant of one of the town's provisional barracks be expelled, in order for the council to undertake repairs and rent it out to someone else. When war broke out in September 1939, the council was considering an eviction from 2 nissens on Rue 'D' of Le Village.
[53] Private archives of Mme. Potié, mayoress of Thiepval. M.Rogez purchased Thiepval's fallow red zone in 1930. Today, this land is farmed by the Potié family.

the state in which it had been left by the advancing British army in 1918.[54] With the exception of a 40 hectare land-holding, the rest of Thiepval's farmland remained fallow, exploited only by itinerant shepherds and metal searchers.[55] Indeed, the only major act of restoration to have taken place in the first seven years of peace had been the building of oak frames (at a cost of 8,000 francs) to shore up the old trench networks of 1916 which lay around the village.[56] Largely deserted as a consequence of its uninhabitable state, Thiepval was an obvious focal point for battlefield tourists and received an annual average of 150,000 curious visitors.[57] Here then, the enduring desire of tourists to seek out the spectacle of 'devastation' across the Western Front, found an outlet in the Somme, in the 1930s.

Nevertheless, any argument that the red zones of 1918 somehow retained their iron grip on the landscape of the 1930s, is horribly overblown. Weber's argument that war damage settlements remained outstanding in the late 1930s is undeniably true, but his contention that 10% of the buildings lost in 1914-18 remained unreconstructed, ignores the fact that many *sinistrés* chose to sell their war damage claims, a process which financed many of the most successful building projects in the reconstruction era. There are perhaps other statistics which speak more eloquently of reconstruction. In the Somme for instance, 28, 000 hectares of farmland had been deemed to be irredeemably shattered, by the prefect in 1918, suggesting a bleak future for many of the 380 ruined communes they enveloped. By 1932, this swathe of

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[54] ADS.5Z70, Thiepval, Affaires Communales. Thiepval's major land owner Henri Portier chose not to return to the Somme in the aftermath of 1918 and accepted the state's offer of *rachat.* His action was supported by the mayor, a fellow landowner who chose likewise not to return to the village and sought to persuade other villagers to accept the *rachat.* The net result was almost a decade of political inertia as returnees fought absentees over the right to decide the fate of their village. As late as 1928, it seemed likely that Thiepval would be abandoned altogether.

[55] ADS.5Z70. Thiepval, Affaires Communales. Council minutes, Junes 1928

[56] ADS.5Z70. Thiepval, Affaires Communales, *sous-préfet* to the prefect, 20 October 1923.

[57] Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism*, p.103.

red zone -the 'desert' to which a shocked Albert Londres had referred- had been whittled down to a few hundred hectares, in other words, less than 1% of the Somme's original *région dévastée*. All but one of the department's 380 ruined or damaged villages (Thiepval) would in consequence experience the public celebration of inauguration at the beginning of the 1930s. This process towards almost total restoration was common to each of the ten devastated departments. In Aisne, where over 95% of departmental territory lay within the zone rouge of 1918, 19,000 hectares of wasteland had been reduced by 50% in the mid 1920s and was little over 900 hectares (5%) by the end of the decade.[58] So successful was this process of rural restoration that only 18 villages across 500 Km of war zone, from the Channel coast to the Vosges ultimately faced the oblivion of non-reconstruction and the unwanted epitaph of *un village mort pour la France*.[59] Located in the departments of Marne, Meurthe-et-Moselle and Meuse, these empty sites -like Thiepval itself- exerted an obvious attraction over all who motored across the *via-sacra*, but whilst prominent in the *Guide Michelin* of the 1930s, they are hardly representative of the red zone as a whole.

If in 1932, Albert lacked the aesthetic homogeneity that suggested a completed work of restoration, we may likewise draw out positive conclusions about the effects of the reconstruction period. *Le Village* did indeed possess a number of *sinistrés* who had been the victims of the cantonal commissions, of Louis Loucheur's budget cuts, of treasury bond payments and of the Poincaré franc, but the social profile of the provisional town suggests that other dynamics were at play. Many who sought lodgings in the nissens of *Le Village* in 1932 were not *sinistrés* at all, but newly arrived workers who had gained employment at the

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[58] Hugh Clout, "La reconstruction rurale en Picardie" in *Reconstruction en Picardie*, p.124
[59] Hugh Clout, *After the Ruins*, p.287

massive Henri Potez aviation factory at Méaulte. Employing 2,000 workers from Albert alone (in the late 1930s night trains brought in more workers from Amiens to cope with rearmament demands), nissens remained a necessary means of coping with a population which rose constantly on the back of industrial expansion. Census information shows that Albert's population rose from 2,500 in the 1830s to its pre-war peak of 7,343 in 1911; by the mid-1930s it stood at over 9,000. Devastation in the Great War not only failed to impede a century long trend of population growth, but in necessitating a large scale industrial reconstruction, it ultimately enhanced it.

We would of course acquire a distorted image of the Somme were we to accept these figures at face value. What they disguise is a startling sense of rupture. Prior to the Great War Albert's population included around 70 foreigners, their number increasing slightly when itinerant labourers arrived to dig brick clay each autumn. With the exception of 1 Hungarian and 2 Swiss, the entire foreign community (approximately 1% of the population) was from Belgium.[60] The period of reconstruction had exacted a profound effect. By the mid 1920s, foreigners in Albert had risen to 1014 (16% of the population) and though this fell back towards the end of the 1920s, Albert remained a multinational community. According to the 1936 census, 501 foreigners from 16 different countries (mainly Poland, Italy, Portugal, Britain and Belgium) had chosen to settle in the town.[61] Greater extremes of distortion were felt in the canton. Villages such as Bazentin, Thiepval and Beaumont-Hamel had all suffered over half a century of population decline as peasants drifted towards the industrial centres of Albert and Amiens, but remained wholly French speaking communities on the eve of the Great War. Population change continued in its aftermath, but at an exaggerated pace. In

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[60] ADS.2MI_LN3/2, Recensements d'Albert, 1911-1936.
[61] ADS.2MI_LN3/2, Recensements d'Albert, 1911-1936

Bazentin for example, a pre-war community of 211 had dwindled to 136 in the mid-1930s. Foreign labourers from Belgium, Poland and Czechoslovakia now constituted over a third of the population.[62] And in Thiepval, the sense of population decline and displacement, was logically at its apotheosis. Like all post-war villages, Thiepval possessed its *indéracinables*: Marie-Louise Duthart, the 'heroine of the ruins,' eventually moved in to a house under the shadow of the Edward Lutyens memorial to 'The Missing of the Somme' on Rue du Mémorial Britannique; her brother rebuilt the family home on the Rue de Pozières, in more or less the same location it had occupied prior to the Great War; Oscar Bellet's family continued to live in St.Pierre Divion, as did the Sueur family, the original returnees to the Ancre Valley in the winter of 1918- but the demographic effects of war, devastation and a troubled reconstruction on this village were startling. When the Duthart family first appeared on Thiepval's census in 1881, they were part of a 345 strong, wholly French community. By 1936, the village's population was just 97. Seven different nationalities -Swiss, Polish, Portuguese, Italian, Belgian, Irish and British- now made up almost 50% of their numbers.[63]

These figures, almost as much as statistics of the war dead themselves, speak eloquently of the psychological rupture endured between 1914-1932 and the paradoxical nature of post-war restoration, but do they point us towards a sense of 'hollowness'; of the 'psychic wounds' of 1914-18 enveloping the Somme?[64] Should we choose to view the symbolic phase as a brittle facade, disguising the enduring nature of devastation, then these statistics loom large. But they were not the dominant feature of the Somme in 1932. The reconstruction of the red zone was ultimately too complex and arguably too successful to be defined by demographics alone. In the midst of landscape defined by stark white Portland stone cemeteries, by

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[62] ADS.2MI_LN18, Recensements de Bazentin, 1836-1936.
[63] ADS.2MI_LN161,Recensements de Thiepval, 1836-1936.
[64] See Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (London, 1995).

multinational village communities, international tourists and shared wartime mythologies, the reconstruction era had created in towns such as Albert, a repository of cultural identity which hinted at a far deeper catharsis. 'Missing' from the Somme in 1932, were not simply the men and women who had died in the Great War, the exiled families who had failed to return to their villages, but the ideological poisons of a kulturkampf, which would engender political division, cultural despair and a new creed of anti-Republicanism across the undamaged regions of *la France épargnée.*

CONCLUSION

Accounts vary as to when the death convulsions of the Third Republic began in earnest. Writing in the 1980s, the French historian Michel Winock laid stress upon the underlying significance of a 'fever' manifesting itself in both hot and cold periods throughout the life-span of the Third Republic. Ultimately, Winock would conclude that the momentum towards parliamentary implosion amongst left-wing factions, the vengeful extremism of the Fascist *ligues*, and the familiar news of political rioting and bloodshed on the streets of Paris which defined the final decade of peacetime France, acquired its irresistibility after the *affaire Stavisky* of 1934.[1] A similar belief in the ireconcilability of Left and Right in inter-war France likewise infuses Herman Lebovics' work. For Lebovics, the divisions which predated the Great War rendered the conflict a relatively peripheral event in determining the nature of the decline of the Third Republic. Instead, the principal psychological influence on French life remains the Dreyfus affair and the deep polarity between *le pays réel* and *le pays légal* which it served to reveal. So dominant is this backdrop of *kulturkampf*, that Lebovics concludes that the cultural death of the Third Republic occurred long before its political demise in 1940.[2]

Others have accorded a more significant position to the events of 1914-18 and the 'psychic wounds' which prevailed thereafter. In the 1970s, Bernard and Dubief made much of the 'irreparable disaster' hidden amidst the euphoria of a military triumph; victory had been

[1] Michel Winock, *La fièvre hexagonale: les grandes crises politiques 1871-1968*, (Paris, 1986), pp. 193-238.
[2] Lebovics, *True France*, p.137.

achieved at the cost of the 'disappearance throughout society of many men, who would have been capable of taking over from those who were naturally weighed down by conservatism and illusion.'[3] In the same decade, Frank Field likewise stressed that the price of victory in 1918 was the key element in foreshortening the Third Republic's life-span, and of course, the ignoble manner of its death: 'For twenty-five years after 1919, at a time when the country needed all the resources of courage and initiative she could find...effective power was in the hands of men who were either too old or too exhausted to match up to their responsibilities.'[4] There are of course many more subtle dimensions to the historiography of the Third Republic; suffice it to state here, that whilst conclusions as to the origins of the decline may inevitably vary from decade to decade, or from historian to historian, in most political and cultural histories of inter-war France an inexorable sense of malaise is writ-large. So often our attention has been drawn to the unmistakable odour of political putrefaction, all enveloping by the end of the 1930s and ready to manifest itself in the sordid sharing of political spoils over the corpse of the body politic in 1940.

It is arguable that the tradition of viewing inter-war France through the prism of such certitude owes as much to the pen of Marc Bloch as it does to the manner of military defeat in 1940 and the political events which shaped war experience thereafter. Writing in the aftermath of the *pax-Germanica* of July 1940, Bloch provided a candid assessment of the six week battle of France as one shaped by the stunning incompetence of an antiquated military hierarchy, but persevered in his search for the roots of France's 'strange defeat' and found them at the core of parliamentary life: 'our party machinery' he concluded, 'had already begun to give off the smell of a dry-rot which it had acquired in small cafés and obscure

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[3] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, p.170.
[4] Field, *Three French Writers*, p.93.

back-rooms.'[5] Bloch's choice of phraseology, itself a reflection of the frequent recourse to the imagery of *pourriture* in the political dialogue of the 1930s[6], has left an indelible mark on the historiography of the period; it has encouraged a somewhat slavish desire to find in all political problems of the 1920s and 1930s, the echoes of a future death knell, no matter how distant. Hand in hand with this comes a preoccupation with proving France to be a nation that was psychologically exhausted by the cost of its triumph in 1914-18. Again, the legacy of Bloch makes its presence felt. The country which Bloch viewed with a mixture of deep fondness and despair from the department of Creuse in 1940, had for some years been profoundly 'hollow': in this sense all that had been conquered by Fascism in the occupied zone or Pétainism in the free zone consisted merely of:

> Our dear dead towns. The leisurely rhythm of their days, their crawling motor-buses, their sleepy officials...the soft atmosphere of lethargy, the lazy ease of their café-life, their local politics and petty trades, their taste for the past, and their mistrust of anything that may shake them out of their comfortable habits.[7]

And it is of course this very concept of hollowness which has acquired an unshakeable centrality as the dominant memory of the 1918-1940 period. Most brilliantly and imaginatively portrayed by Eugen Weber in his 1994 work, *The Hollow Years*, France in the 1930s appears to us as a nation 'submerged by the dark weeds of mourning' in which the red flag of Communism or the white flag of pacifism had replaced the tricolour as the dominant symbols of a collective political creed; patriotism having died 'in the trenches, on the Marne, at Verdun.'[8] 'Psychic wounds' from the Great War and economic woes from its aftermath contribute to the misery of a decade in which the probability of war engenders only further

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[5] Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat* (New York, 1986), p.157
[6] Winock, *La fièvre hexagonale*, p.206.
[7] Bloch, *Strange Defeat*, p.141.
[8] Weber, *The Hollow Years*, pp.14-17.

political and military timidity, culminating in the farcical shortcomings of the Maginot Line, the humiliating familiarity of mass civilian exodus in 1940 and the anarchy of mayors whose desperation to declare their commune *une ville ouverte*, turns local crowds against their own soldiers.[9]

Given the focal point of this thesis -limited as it is to the experience of one town and its surrounding villages in the Somme between 1914 and 1932 -little opportunity is offered to engage with the dominant themes of historical debate concerning France as a totality in the 1930s. Though *sinistrés* continued to claim compensation in the 1930s and provisional settlements continued to feature in the town's landscape, Albert's story of restoration effectively ends with the inauguration ceremonies of August 1932. As such, no space may be afforded here to examining how the fractious political climate of the decade lodged itself in the collective psyche of a community, which by then had endured a recent history of occupation, exile, devastation and painstaking reconstruction. Whilst this points towards a gap in the historiography of the reconstruction era which cries out to be filled, it also underlines the problematic, possibly flawed nature of any history of the inter-war Third Republic, which fails to take into account the unique histories of Albert and thousands of communes like it, which for more than two thirds of the post-war period constituted *les régions dévastées.* Exhausted, impoverished, diplomatically isolated and consumed by demographic anxiety though it may have been, inter-war France undertook a rebuilding project which was breathtaking both in its scale and ultimate success. Did this achievement leave any lasting impression upon the national mentality, save an apparent desperation to

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[9] Ibid., p.277. Weber draws on several examples of towns in the central departments of France where such incidents occurred. Marc Bloch had likewise suggested that 'too many mayors thought it was their duty to ask that their towns should not be defended...' Bloch, *Strange Defeat*, p.131.

avoid replicating the *bilan de guerre* of 1914-18, by declaring as many communes as possible *villes ouvertes*? Apparently not. Weber allocates just a handful of gloom-ridden paragraphs to the *régions dévastées*, focussing upon the hollowness of areas where much appeared to have been left unbuilt. Michel Winock likewise reinforces the dominant political image of a France 'enchained by its myths and its divisions,' psychologically compelled towards 'the spiritual reassurances of polarisation' and addicted to the drama of impending civil war.[10] Whilst all of this makes perfect sense when we focus upon the intrigues of the political factions which both created and destroyed the Popular Front governments of the mid to late 1930s, it seems that we are in danger of erasing from the political map of the Hexagon, 10 northern departments, for whom the inter-war period was ultimately about renewal and regeneration; regions whose unique mythologies were drawn from a radically different synthesis of war experience, and came to reflect an alternative image of France.

'This lost island of planters of wooden crosses...and Paris back there, so close, two hours away..Paris still celebrating.'[11] This was how Roland Dorgelès sketched the psychological borderland between the *zone rouge* and *la France épargnée*. Dorgelès was not alone. To the awed writers, journalists, tourists, pilgrims and politicians who streamed towards the provisional villages of the *régions dévastées* in the early 1920s, the strangeness of their mud-splattered communities was one of the unspoken voyeuristic attractions. Less evident perhaps, was the quiet influence which devastation exerted in shaping political identity. Tourists may have been well versed in the physical geography of the Western Front from the pages of the *Guide-Michelin*, but the red zone came to represent a moral landscape which was unique to those who inhabited it, and wholly independent from the memorial sites which

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[10] Winock, *La fièvre hexagonale*, p.237
[11] Dorgelès, *Le réveil des morts*, pp.180-1.

marked the *via sacra.* Had tourists or pilgrims encountered a single copy of *La Voix des Ruines* in the early 1920s, this much would have been patently clear: whilst *la France épargnée* bore the psychological burden of *la dette morale*, a debt which manifested itself in an increasingly political form as the *ancien combattant* voice grew louder, red zone mythology drew strength less from the 'horror' of the wartime trenches than the civilian hardships in the aftermath of 1918. This fundamental disparity in the political uses of the moral landscape of the Western Front cannot be overlooked. The trenches themselves may have all but disappeared from the red zone by the mid-1920s, but it would be unwise to assume that key psychological traits in collective identity simply dissipated with the reassuring sight of physical restoration. Normality certainly returned to Albert, shaped by the way in which the state and the local community engaged in the process of reconstruction, by the social ordering which took place in the town between 1919-25 and the political divisions which grew in strength thereafter, but this does not necessarily point towards a depth of empathy with the 'psychic wounds' of *la France épargnée.*

Fundamental differences remained. Eugen Weber begins his opening chapter of *The Hollow Years* with the provocative assertion that 'The 1930s began in August 1914.' Here, we may perhaps challenge Weber's chronological concept by stating that in the red zones of the old Western Front, the post-war era began not with the military victory engineered by the allied armies in 1918, but with the inauguration ceremonies of 1931-2. Weber goes on to tell us that by 1931, 'carnival was dead' in a nation beset by the introspection of mourning and financial crisis.[12] Again, we may contend the political meanings implicit in the metaphor. 'Carnival' was very much alive in the newly restored regions of the Somme during the symbolic phase, the collective pride of the crowds which gathered in Albert to witness the cortège of Albert

[12] Weber, *The Hollow Years*, p.33

Lebrun, bearing witness to a relationship with the state which was largely untouched by the disillusionment that plagued *la France épargnée*. The poisonous invective which poured forth against the state in the emergency phase of reconstruction was crucial to this. The ploy of imaging France via the binary opposition of *zone rouge* and *la France épargnée* mirrored the wartime vilification of *l'embusqué* and performed a similar function in the construction and maintenance of a collective identity. As a political weapon in the battle with the state for precious financial and material resources, its utility was likewise undeniable. But by 1932 these battles had been all but won. The state had delivered on its promises and the poisons had been exhausted. This is not to deny that *Albertins* suffered from the financial crises which beset the post-war nation as a whole. Bernard and Dubief suggest that the ranks of the SFIO would be swelled in the 1930s by members of the middle classes who had been more or less dispossessed by the Poincaré Franc[13]; Weber likewise talks of the 'bitter grudge' of erstwhile solid citizens, who would henceforth never trust the state in the way they once had.[14] It seems probable that amongst the most embittered masses we may encounter the few unfortunate *sinistrés* whose treasury bond war damages counted for little by the late 1920s, and for whom the *Charte des sinistrés* ultimately amounted to a worthless piece of paper. Nonetheless, for the vast majority of *Albertins* -Catholics, Radicals and Socialists alike- Republican paternalism meant something more than 'hollow' political rhetoric; by 1932, it manifested itself in the fabric of the town's 2000 houses, its schools, hospital, town hall and in la Place d'Armes, Notre Dame de Brébières.

This points to a psychological dimension of red zone politics which appears to have been strikingly absent from the dominant discourses of inter-war France, namely the positive

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[13] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic, p.157*
[14] Weber, *The Hollow Years*, pp.29-30.

identification of the individual with *le pays légal*. Those who were driven to look upon the Third Republic through the optic of an intangible political filth, degeneracy and decomposition in the 1930s, tended to find comfort in the nihilistic extremes of ideology. For the communist and Fascist *ligues* which engaged each other amidst Parisian street blockades in the late 1930s, the panacea was of course revolution. In the red zone, where filth had manifested itself in an oppressive physical form throughout the emergency phase, the panacea was restoration; the midwife to reconstruction being found not in the utopian vision of a post-revolutionary state, but firmly rooted in the political culture of the Third Republic itself.[15] This being so, the supposedly deep-rooted Maurrasian distinctions between *le pays réel* and *le pays légal* which Lebovics identifies as the heart beat of the *kulturkampf* ultimately came to mean precious little in the political culture of the Somme, when perhaps they had counted for something more in the era before devastation. If in the prevalence of post-war eulogies relating to the ancient earth of Picardie and the peasant communities who farmed it, we may find hints of cultural affinity with a nationalist vision of France, its core political dogma of hatred towards the mediocrity of the Third Republic is wholly absent. By 1932, the restored earth was undeniably the birth-child of *le pays légal*, and inextricably linked to Republican mythology. Extremism -be it of the creed espoused by *Action Française*- encountered strangely infertile ground in the shattered regions of the Somme. The extremist Catholic press had died its death in Great War, and nobody sought its resurrection. The *Comité Royaliste de Picardie* amounted to little more than 200 members by the end of the 1920s, the sum total of their activities being masses in Amiens in memory of Louis XVI.[16] Communists fared little better. Over four hundred militant communists were listed on

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[15] Lebovics, *True France*, p.172 The term has been borrowed from Lebovics who describes a Vichyite vision of the post-Republican state as 'a midwife at the birth of the old society.'
[16] ADS.933PER1 *L'Écho: Bulletin Mensuel des Sections d'Action Française de la 1e Zone*, February 1929.

Ministry of the Interior files in the mid 1920s, the majority of them being activists in the undamaged Amiens railway suburb of Longueau. In the red zone itself, Communist activists and indeed communist supporters are few and far between.[17] Communists journals like *Le Travailleur de la Somme* went unread by those loyal to traditional Radical and Socialist offerings such as *La Gazette de Péronne* and *Le Cri du Peuple*, and quickly disappeared from circulation. In the decade when cultural alienation from the 'rotten' Third Republic was effecting a political polarisation throughout France, the red zones of the Somme remained what they had largely been prior to the Great War: Radical, Socialist or centre-right and deeply committed to the regime which had restored them.

This being so, it is clearly time for historians of twentieth century France to refocus their attention. By turning away from the traditional legacies of the Western Front and searching out the post-war borderland separating *la zone rouge* from *la France épargnée*, we may acquire a greater sense of clarity and perspective on the psychological foundations of France's hollow years. As things stand, the dominant image of inter-war France, constructed by generations of historians from Bloch to Weber, suggests that *la France épargnée* was ultimately spared very little by its geographical fortune in the Great War of 1914-18. Exhausted and enchained to myths of irreconcilable division, collective beliefs in national, political decomposition appear as something of a quasi-religious creed. The disparity between this image of inter-war France, and the predominant political culture of *la Somme dévastée* is self-evident. By acknowledging this disparity, we may understand better, the conditions under which divided societies in the first half of the twentieth century consented to a degree of political unity. It is to be hoped that we may likewise come to view

[17] ADS.KZ808, Individus dangereux pour l'ordre interieur, revised list, 23 January 1925. Ministry of the Interior files show that Albert possessed only 12 members of the Communist party. In Péronne there were just 4.

reconstruction as an ideological concept and as a medium of collective political participation, rather than as a mere physical labour, to be understood by a procession of statistics.

Thus, in the Somme -and perhaps across the *régions dévastées* as a whole- though the scars of war were self evident, it was an alternative inter-war myth which held sway, drawing its strength from representations of identity which were by 1932 ingrained in the aesthetics of their rebuilt towns. This undeniably distinguished towns such as Albert from the 'hollow' regions of *la France épargnée* at the beginning of the 1930s, but did the red zones of the Western Front retain their distance from the politics of cultural despair at the end of the decade of *pourriture*? It is not implausible to think so. Three weeks before war broke out in 1939, *La Gazette de Péronne* -the mouthpiece of communities with most to fear and most to lose from the resumption of warfare after such a brief interlude- assessed the calamities facing the French nation. Drawing a favourable comparison between the relative strengths of a post-Dreyfus France in 1914 and the nation in 1939, there was little sense of the tired resignation which Weber has assumed to define France as a totality on the eve of the Second World War. France, it declared was 'more united' and better prepared to face the enemy in 1939.[18]

Eleven months later, the claim of national solidarity lay in tatters. France had been defeated and the Third Republic was dead. Evacuated in their totality in the evening of 19 May 1940 -hours before the first German soldiers reappeared in Place d'Armes- *Albertins* drifted back in the following weeks to face the routine of life under occupation. The council reconvened in the town hall it now shared with the Wehrmacht. A new mayor had been installed by the *Feldkommandatur* in charge of Albert, replacing Dr.Verrier, an *indéracinable* of the

[18] ADS.241PER19, *La Gazette de Péronne*, 3 August 1939.

front-line town in 1914-18. Asked by Maréchal Pétain to contribute funds for the plight of *la France dévastée*- a request made to all communes which now constituted *la France épargnée*, Albert's councillors complied and voted a gift of 5,000 francs.[19] Though its own work of restoration remained incomplete, the moral paradigm which had underpinned the town and its mythology since the first bombardments of September 1914, had been inverted. The silent, symbolic edifice of the golden Virgin and the streets surrounding it had this time escaped the gunfire of invasion, but in other respects the reconstruction of Albert had been shattered. The hollow years had begun.

[19] A.D.Somme, 5Z80, Albert, Affaires Communales 1939-40, council minutes, 12 December 1940.

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