THE PROBLEM OF FOOD PRODUCTION SINCE THE ARMISTICE

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The farmer is greatly perplexed as to what his policy should be in regard to food production for the coming season. One year ago notices were posted everywhere that food would win the war. Whether or not it was true that food would actually win the war, we know now that the lack of food would have lost the war; that is to say, we nearly lost it in the early summer because of the shortage of food. The world was scoured for wheat and for every substitute that could save wheat. A stimulating price was fixed to increase its production, and people began to talk about famine, not without reason, for unquestionably thousands have died during the war for lack of food.

Now, however, we are literally smothered in wheat. We have more meat and dairy products in storage and in prospect than ever before in our history. It looks as if the war is over, and the question with the farmer now is, "Has our stress for food production passed?" The only adequate means for answering this question is to learn what we can of the actual conditions across the water.

In the early autumn the Secretary of Agriculture dispatched a commission to Europe to study the agricultural situation in England, France, and Italy; and since that time Mr. Hoover himself has been abroad endeavoring to learn still more accurately what the food conditions are, not only with the Allies but more especially in the central and eastern districts.

The Secretary's commission reported substantially that despite the distressed conditions, the cattle population of England had actually increased since the war began; both sheep and pigs had declined in numbers but not alarmingly. In France all live stock had unquestionably been reduced, and the same was true in Italy; but even so, the reduction had been made with care and a very large amount of breeding stock was preserved and widely scattered. Belgium, of course, and northern France were entirely stripped of live stock and of all forms of food.

Quite aside from these considerations, it must be remembered that, except for the Percheron horse, England is the only belligerent country which uses our breeds of live stock. We shall not expect, therefore, any considerable call for breeding stock, because in general each country, except Belgium, will restore its own herds. But every one of these countries will require large shipments of animal and dairy products and wheat, in order to preserve its own herds as far as possible for breeding purposes.

The best study which the commission was able to make led to the report that the Allies would need from us this year some twenty million tons of food as against the eleven millions of the preceding year. It must be remembered that this estimate was made before the signing of the armistice and that now, with shipping somewhat released, a wider market is open, especially for wheat.

Little is yet known definitely about the condition of Germany and Austria-Hungary. The systematic thoroughness with which they stole everything which could be eaten, taken in connection with the fact that this was an industrial war in which the Central Powers set out to destroy their neighbors, leads us to conclude that Germany at least is fairly well provided for. Such was her own assertion, although there are indications now that all is not well in Germany, especially in respect to food.

Conditions in Russia are practically unknown except that in general she has ceased producing and millions of people are starving in the very districts which were once exporting wheat.

How then may we sum up the outstanding conditions as a whole? First of all, western Europe will probably not need any very great numbers of breeding animals from this side, but will require extensive shipments of animal products, especially fats, certainly for the current year and probably for at least another.

As to the middle and eastern sections, everything depends upon the stability of government. The need for food in those districts is unquestionable, but without stable governments and the required credit they cannot secure it unless we are generous enough to give it to them, and there are those who are inclined to say that Germany has

sent to the bottom of the ocean some millions of tons of perfectly good wheat and meat. It is there. Let them go and get it! Perfectly just though this might be, it is neither foresighted nor diplomatic, and unquestionably the Peace Conference is wise in doing everything it can to establish governments in the defeated sections with the greatest speed and the greatest certainty possible. If this cannot be done, and if the Russians are to go on butchering each other indefinitely, then the actual call for food, beyond that of our Allies, will not be large.

It is fair to assume, however, that arrangements will be made for feeding Armenia and for relieving distress in all allied or neutral countries so far as credit can be arranged. Even this will call for an enormous amount of food and if in addition the Central Powers and Russia should succeed in establishing stable governments in the next few weeks, the call upon the United States for food will be enormous.

We must not forget that Russia, next to the United States, is the greatest wheat producing country in the world, producing over one-fifth of the entire crop of the earth, and yet, if she should establish a stable government she will at once become an importer.

Very much has been said of the Australian wheat crop, but Australia under normal conditions produces rather less wheat than Spain. Besides, under present conditions the famine in India, which is the third wheat-producing country in the world, is so great as to require that the Australian wheat crop shall be moved in that direction.

The last crop in Argentina is small. Even at the best, it must be remembered that all of South America produced less wheat than either Canada or France before the war, and that Argentina produces less than Italy.

Last of all, we are easily deceived about our own supplies. The wheat crop of the United States is harvested during the four months from May through August, and another month would include the entire North American product. Under ordinary conditions, this crop makes its way into the market somewhat slowly, and usually a great amount is held back by the producer for the increase that follows the harvest season. This year, however, the price was fixed. There was no reason for holding the crop even twenty-four hours, to lose in weight by drying or in amount

by insect and rodent depredation. The cry for wheat had become insistent and every influence operated to put this crop quickly and completely upon the market. It taxed transportation to the utmost, particularly as we were still in the war. The storage capacity of the country was not equal to its reception and the problem at once arose of getting rid of wheat in every conceivable way. It was for this reason that Mr. Hoover took off the lid and told us to eat it up, even while he knew that thousands of people were in distress for the wheat that we did not need but which they could not get. The same thing is true of other products. We had fallen into the habit of saving waste and as a result we have been overtaken by the flood tide; and that is why we can pull down our conservation signs.

However, should conditions suddenly improve across the water and should the distressed people there be able to transport and pay for the food which they sorely need, the call upon America will be sharp and our supply will be inadequate. That is why Mr. Hoover has said that when the fixed price is removed, wheat may again go to $3.50 a bushel.

Taken all in all, the situation is no longer one of distress so far as the Allies and ourselves are concerned, Russia excepted. So far as all other parts of the world are concerned, food is yet the most critical question before humanity. Such a war as this cannot be fought without famine and its attendant pestilence. It has never yet been done and doubtless never will be.

From the standpoint of production, the great question now is the rapidity with which the world can get ready to buy. Europe clearly has need of food long before it can produce it, so that if the world is to be fed in the next few months it must draw heavily upon the United States,—just how heavily no man is able to predict.