War and the Economy

Soldiers of course bore the brunt of the almost continuous conflict, but civilians were by no means insulated from the events or from their repercussions on economic activity and daily life. Having observed French soldiers in a range of situations – exposed to shelling and battlefield horrors, bivouacked on the freezing steppes of Russia and Eastern Europe, fighting on warships and in the Egyptian desert, or in the scarcely less chaotic and dangerous conditions of field hospitals – it is now time to look at the group that formed the majority of the French population, the civilians. Few civilians had exposure to the physical reality of combat, but all had to endure the war’s consequences. The next two chapters are given over to this other facet of war: the ‘home front’ and the war experience of civilians.

The businessmen of France – merchants, shipowners, craftsmen, entrepreneurs – were the first civilians to feel the full impact when war broke out. Before long, however, the political and military crisis was making far-reaching changes to activity and working conditions in the agricultural sector. In fact, the whole fabric of the French economy would be undermined by a conflict that was unprecedented in scale and duration, and involved massive requisitioning of men, material, and foodstuffs, a disruption or breakdown in communication and exchange, and an increasing militarization of society. Added to which, a succession of monetary and financial crises (several major defeats, notably Trafalgar, precipitated bank and stock market crashes) eroded confidence and depressed consumer spending. First to be affected were the great seaports, but the consequences of military operations and commercial and industrial crises were soon being felt throughout much of urban and rural France.
For the majority of players in the economy, the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars were a period of contraction and of changes in occupation or location. For a tiny minority they were an opportunity for speculation and personal financial gain. Finally, for a significant number they were a struggle for economic survival that sometimes ended in ruin.

I. Agriculture

By its demands on manpower, conscription generated deep discontent in rural France, especially at harvest time. In July 1793, the administrators of the District of Gaillac replied to the Directory of the Tarn department:

We have received your letter of 4 [July] concerning the workers you requested for Perpignan. We shall carry out the requisition, but we feel that it will serve no good purpose in an agricultural district like ours, particularly now, at harvest time. We have provided the fatherland with so many defenders that their absence is greatly felt and we are short of labour for working the land... How do you think we can supply men without leaving our properties uncultivated; we are ardent patriots but we cannot do the impossible.¹

A few weeks later, in September, at the height of the grape harvest, they even petitioned the directory of the department for a special measure – the return of the local conscripts to do field work – that was warranted by the needs of agriculture, they claimed. The request was unrealistic and not granted but shows the extent of the repercussions of the war effort in the countryside. ‘This is the period when grapes are harvested and seed is sown, and is a most precious time. Would it not be possible to send all our men home for the grape harvest and sowing season?’²

The situation was the same in many other rural regions. At Porrentruy, in the Franche-Comté, François-Joseph Guélat noted in his diary on 19 October 1793,

There were representations from many youths and from their mothers and fathers, requesting exemption from recruitment, based on the law that dispensed all those needed for threshing grain, as well as millers’ and bakers’ assistants, at the rate of one per master. Rather than risk accusation, none of them were sent off.³