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"The Seed Corn of a Nation" Military Draft and Crop Reduction in Georgia during World War I

To have a man taken from his plow and farm who is producing something for the support of his wife and children is something the people do not understand. At about the end of World War I these were the last words of a note sent on July 14th, 1918 by E. B. Rogers, member of Chatnam County Council of Defense to N.G. Bartlett, Georgia director of the bureau which acted as an intermediary between the military authorities and the young conscripts who, during training before leaving for the European front, sent on application for getting permission to stay away for agricultural labour. Far from expressing a negative opinion on the United States intervention in the war, the letter denounced a social condition worn out by the efforts and sacrifices which, since April 1917, had characterized everyday life in local communities, heavily made responsible for the aim of becoming self-sufficient in foodstuffs and, in the meantime, supplying the American Army and, consequently, the Allies. It was underlined that what was compromising production in Georgia farms was the decrease in furloughs granted to young men for seed and harvest time; these permissions had become less frequent with the nation being progressively involved in the war. This by then chronic lack of farmers, which in some cases had caused considerable shrinkages in crops, if not even the abandonment of fields, was the core of Rogers' note and opened questions about the people's attitude to the introduction of compulsory draft. [1]

If initial neutrality had undoubtedly supported the resumption of product trade in the whole South, above all cotton, from the social point of view entering the conflict had produced very special and problematic conditions, especially for Georgia

which was completely unprepared for facing such an emergency. The Congress choice of raising a strong military force turning to the Selective Service System, for the first time without any racial bond, was the federal war measure which most affected the state. The bill fostered existing suspects in Georgia rural world against everything which was decided north of Dixon and Mason line, nourishing a climate of indifference to the conflict which had already resulted in the low number of volunteers from the upcountry who had volunteered in the days following the declaration of war, before the final approval of the draft.

On the contrary narrowmindedness and tepidity did not characterize Georgia Senator Thomas W.Hardwick, who, during the long debate that took place in April and May, declared:

> *Young men from Georgia should not be forced into the trenches for European squabbles..to decide who shall have Alsace or Lorraine or Bosnia or Herzegovina, or some other outlandish country over there.* [2]

Deeply aware of the consequences a draft would have brought to small and scattered rural communities in their state, congressmen upheld the use of voluntary enlistment, putting forward strong perplexities about general military service. Representatives Charles H. Brand and Charles R. Crisp who, later reversing their positions, would surprisingly vote in favour of Selective Service System, had at first expressed themselves at the House as follows:

> *I am opposed to the Army because there is not a single line in it which exempts the farmer, whether landlord or tenant, though the Army bill supporters claim that this will be done.*
>
> *The idea is common in some sections that all married men and farmers will be exempt from military service This is not true, and when the law is put into operation many who now think they have immunity from conscription will wake up and find themselves in some training camp.* [3]

These positions derived from simple geographical observations which could be made by anyone who had carefully read the 1910 state census. Population distribution on territory was extremely

scattered. About 80 per cent of the population lived in towns with less than 2,500 inhabitants, and, though some of these communities were cotton mills, most of them were rural units, where generally modest income black tenants farmers lived. Small white farmers did not cultivate much wider lands, amounting to a number which did not differ too much from colored people, moreover confirming the trend to be bound to tenancy. [4]

Even considering these demographic aspects, it was however true that from the conceptual point of view draft itself was not an absolute novelty for the state. Most young people who were destined to fight in French trenches represented the direct descendants of those who, only fifty years before, had been members of the Confederate Army. This element weighed heavily on Georgia families' opinion, as they still remembered the tragic Civil War facts and were inclined to connect those past events with their sons' possible departure to Europe.

During the Confederacy's short life the recruitment of men for the army had just been one of the most urgent problems dealt with by the newborn government which, with the Conscription Act of April 1862, had legislated that white men between 18 and 35 years of age should serve in the army for a period of three years. Then, with the steady negative war course, conscription had been extended to white men between 17 and 50 years, to go as far as black slaves enlistment in the last desperate months of war. [5]

In Georgia reactions to the draft had been particularly strong. Rising as a supporter of the rights of each single state, popular Governor Joseph E. Brown became the most inflamed opponent to the Richmond government centralizing initiatives. He tried to keep control of state militia as long as he could, and, when the state Supreme Court sided with the Confederacy, he went on boycotting draft by exempting, to the extent of his power, the greatest number of state employees. In his action Brown got support from a large part of the population, who confirmed him in his fourth straight term as governor by an evident majority of favourable votes. Being so tenaciously pursued by a high political leader, the news of an opposition to draft went beyond the state border, giving Georgia an

undoubted leadership among the southern states, many of which did not fail to follow its example.[6]

Even if during the Civil War the role of Confederate government propaganda about enlistment was undeniably inferior, both in techniques and in means, to that of Washington agencies during World War I, fifty years after sad memories still gave rise to emotions and critical reactions about the subject. Mrs. W.H. Felton wrote to the *Atlanta Constitution* in an impassioned letter:

> *East Tennessee, southtoest Virginia, western North and South Carolina and northern Georgia determined to resist army service by the only way possible - desertion - and they got out o] reach. I tremble to think of what the conscription of young men in 1917 will bring to us - because I do know what it did for us in the fateful sixties. They are the seed-corn of the nation. May God help us to examine the route before we are finally lost in the wilderness*![7]

To such reactions, quite diffused in the first months of war, others much more determined and vigorous were added. Thanks to his charisma, Tom Watson, the late populist movement historical leader, had in fact developed a purely agrarian opposition, with similar motivations to those of the 1861 movement, and had exerted a remarkable influence over small farmers, inciting them to evade, if not to boycott, food savings directives given by civil mobilization organs, at least up to August 1917. Appealing to states rights violation once again, Watson had sided passionately against the declaration of war, the draft and federal centralization, seriously hindering official propaganda. Only when the paper he edited was compelled to close, in compliance with the Espionage Act of June 1917, after months of meetings and demostrations, was his dissent silenced. [8]

Apart from this last radical stand, which was quite definite in its ideological contents, as months went by, in the civil mobilization peripheral appointees there started an attitude which can be regarded as moderately critical of some aspects caused by the war and particularly by the draft. As already pointed out at the beginning of this essay, while reading Council of Defense of Georgia confidential correspondence of 1918, cmbarassment is

evident in admitting a deficit in agricultural production nearly always in relation to the drafting drawing of men carried out by the U.S. army. In other words, after the enthusiastic support to the plan of the national armed contingent, excitement developed more in urban areas rather than elsewhere, it is attested that the ideal spur had to be confronted with a reality where there was no room for illusion. On the one hand the imperative was to keep approval to the Government choices, but, on the other hand, the new conditions determined a less and less concealed uneasiness about an unforeseen and so wide military commitment.

First of all, troubles created by lack of labor were caused by confused relationships between farmers and civil authorities. State agencies had become indispensable links between the people and military departments in charge of anything concerning exemptions or furloughs. With the drawing up of lists containing names which were susceptible to a future call to arms, search for exemption or collocation in time delayed draft contingents had become essential targets to be achieved for a lot of farmers. But attaining these benefits was neither easy nor granted because federal government had decided to ask Georgia for a high draftees contingent in consequence of the low number of volunteers from the state. To try to face these difficult circumstances and to reach a demographic balance, Governor Nathaniel E. Harris had authorized the creation of the exemption boards at the end of May 1917, but, apart from the fact that they had started working after some time, they left large groups of the population dissatisfied.

The boards had to deal with people who had already been registered, attending to papers for possible exemptions. Bureaucracy provided that applications should go through district boards, then to the Adjutant General state office and finally be sent to Washington, whence results should be waited for. This long procedure, which would be simplified during the war without giving the expected results, did not help farmers, whose immediate needs to know their destiny deeply required different times and ways. With sharp but model words a Valdosta cotton farmer maintained that he was *"too busy about his crop to worry over soldier stunts and he is more use to his government right on the*

farm than in the army". He was echoed by a farmer from Quitman, who had said that: *"he has twenty-seven cows to milk in the evening and that the pesky things won't let anyone else handle them"*, according to the *Atlanta Constitution.*[9] Another young farmer, William Tyson, took quite seriously the draft and killed his young wife and then committed suicide at his home when he received a summons from the local exemption board to appear for the examination.[10]

After the general enrollment of summer 1917, the insufficient number of farmers started progressively to burden agricultural economy, as men were continuously leaving for training camps. At federal level the Exemption boards were soon considered inadequate to deal with the agricultural sector, therefore since the first months of 1918 legislators had introduced further tools which could be used by local government to face the problem. In March of the same year the Dent bill was passed, which authorized the War Secretary to give furloughs to cantonments recruits who had voluntarily sent a request to go back to work in the fields for a limited period during harvest time. Then the initiative had been followed by Work or Fight laws, which had been promulgated in May of the same year with the aim of exploiting to the utmost the underutilized energies or the ones which were not occupied in war-pertinent jobs. Both these attempts to answer to the pressing complaints about lack of manpower hardly counterbalanced the continuous increase of contingents departures to Europe, which in June caused a further age widening in military lists and the calling of all those who were twenty one in that period.

It was during this wavering of measures, which seemed to support labor increase and extended military service at the same time, that initial availability from the representatives in charge of civilian mobilization in Georgia counties started being undermined, putting to a severe test their initial trust and consent. Aware of the fact that about 90,000 men had been called to the camps and about 50,000 of them were from rural areas, they could not remain in silence. The alarm had been given by the Commissioner of Agriculture J.J. Brown, an esteemed notable, who, after having been overwhelmed by a growing amount of letters denouncing

situations quite different from being favourable to an increase in production, had publicly declared:

> *Georgia faces a crop reduction. There has been a heavy toll taken from the farming areas in the drafting of the farm managing sons of Georgia farmers well-advanced in years...The result has been that ten-plow farms have been struggling to man two or three, and hundreds of acres of farm land producing beauily last year may remain idle this year. ..Immediate action is necessary.* [11]

Notwithstanding this appeal two months later the situation had worsened and Brown, privately this time, continued to express his perplexities about furlough administration:

> *I called on General French, who is commander in charge of that Camp...He stated to me that on account of the existing conditions on the western front in France, he did not deem it wise to grant any furloughs at the present time...I fear that those who are administering the provisions of the Dent bill do not understand the grave importance of the farm labor...It has never been my purpose to insist upon anything that would impair the efficiency of our army, but if in this world's war our victory depends upon food, then I think that it is as dangerous to impair our farming interests as that of any other unit of our war strenght.* [12]

In spite of warnings coming from this agricultural competent figure, the most part of requests for furloughs were not answered to the detriment of natural resources rhythms which, of course, did not know any delay. The apex of the crisis occurred in the period May - July 1918, as the large number of letters sent to the Governor witness. In that period some farmers families' wrote:

> *I am in Valdosta with my father and mother but we are poor people. My father has a large family, he has five small children and if there is any way to get him back I would appreciate highest.* [13]

> *I have decided to write you about the farming situation, we are getting on a deplorable situation. The farmers of our county is being called to the army as fast as they can ...if there is not a staff the farms will be abandoned.* [14]

> *Governor Dorsey, please come down on the farming counties of Glasscock and other counties around here and make a personal investigation of the*

awful situation in regard to farm labor. I think that about 3/4 *or* 4/4 *of the calls from this county has been from the farms.* [15]

To alleviate these circumstances the use of tractors in agriculture was introduced but, in spite of initial enthusiasm, this measure needed rather long learning times as it took place in a rural context almost devoid of technical knowledge. Even if it had nearly doubled the machines used by farmers, as a matter of fact reducing the need of men of at least 1,700 people, this initiative had to be necessarily supported by more effective measures.[16]

Acting accordingly new Governor Hugh M. Dorsey, putting into practice the Dent bill, had created the Farm Furloughs Bureau, which had been officially established in Atlanta in June 1918. In his director N.G. Bartlett's intentions it was considered as the appropriate solution to reduce the acute shortage of laborers in the fields:

I take the pleasure in calling your attention to the attitude that the farmers have towards this war. I am pleased to say that I have not found a single man who has complained or critized the government for taking farm labor, but rather they seem to be willing to whip the Kaiser at any cost to them...The establishment of this Bureau, to cooperate with the military Authorities, and at the same time to try to give the man on the farm a square deal is one of the best steps of the resources of this state. [17]

These rhetorical words were followed by poor results. Once again from the beginning of the war, good wishes would not produce effective relief, thus keeping anxiety alive among farmers who did not stop looking for all possible praticable means to avoid the draft or at least to obtain furloughs even for short periods. Requests like this of soldier W.J. Norris from Camp Wheeler shortly began increasing on the bureau desks:

I was raised on a farm and was drafted away from the farm and have done "farming all my life and nothing else" ...I am perfectly willing to serve my country in any capacity, but I only want to make my crop. [18]

The Board had been opened for three months and only 2,043 applications had been dealt with, while 150 were waiting. Clerks

worked slowly and, besides lack of funds and a bureaucracy loaded with byzantine rules, military authorities were still reluctant to give furloughs. Very politely but firmly as well, flat refusals followed one another, like this reply by the commander of Camp Hanchock in Augusta:

> *The situation here is difficult to explain in a letter...Up to the present time, however I have been forced to disapprove practically all applications for furloughs for men under my command.* [19]

By contrast, as harvest was approaching, the Governor wished a greater broadmindness from the military authorities and wrote to Bartlett:

> *You will agree with me that if the Military Authorities enforce their rule declining furloughs to soldiers until they have been in camp at least 20 days, it unll be of little avail to them furlough then...Of course there may be some military necessity which will prevent making this concession; but the situation is such that I feel justified in asking you to at least present the matter to the proper officials.*[20]

Bartlett would have had very little time to fulfil the Governor's requests as the Bureau had necessarily to stop work within a few months owing to lack of financial resources. Even if it was the expression of a federal act, this institution was based on state finances and had suffered the inability of local authorities to forecast and run a correct budget.

The same incompetence in applying federal decisions occurred in the use of Work or Fight laws that had incomprehensibly been passed by Georgia General Assembly at the end of August 1918 with a considerable delay, and, according to Georgia Historical Association documents, they were literally a "dead letter" in most part of the rural counties.[21]

This failure in the administration of the resources did not pass unnoticed in Washington, where it was decided to send some inspectors to Georgia. After careful investigations they concluded that, even if the lack of labor in agriculture was common to every southern state, Georgia lagged far behind in organization and,

unlike elsewhere, very little had been done to reach at least acceptable solutions. Disagreements and lack of coordination among the various departments had hampered the war effort, even giving rise to absurd situations:

> *Not a single Agricultural County Agent has been exempted by the Local Exemption or District Board in Georgia, despite the fact that Secretary Houston has personally signed many claims for deferred classification on their behalf. The attitude of the Boards in Georgia toward the Department of Agriculture, has been "go to hell" and they have actually used these words in certain cases.* [22]

A brief and close look to the statistical data suggests that the quick contraction of work force which institutions had had to face was not caused only by draft. Leaving the military side apart, it is important to consider the migratory movement of the blacks towards the war industries in the northern cities, which had reduced the presence of colored people in Georgia countryside by 50,000 people just in the period May 1916 - September 1917. Besides, the high wages offered to those who had worked in the building of state cantonments had attracted a lot of farmers to towns, as they were willing to move, even temporarily, to military structures. This last factor must not be underestimated because no less than six cantonments were built in Georgia and a considerable number of navy yards and war industries were concentrated in Savannah and Brunswick.

Moreover it must be underlined that the considerable number of applications for furloughs did not become greater because many black recruits, coming from very poor areas, realized that their rate of pay plus family allotments through War Risk Insurance, would enable them to contribute as much to the support of their dependants as would their earnings outside and consequently did not rely on the exemption.[23]

Georgia agriculture had hardly born the weight of such a considerable dislocation of men and had nearly collapsed, above all because of the fast growing in foodstuff demand which had forced country people to increase production and rhythms forcedly to up to that time unknown levels. A Clarke county landowner's

words describe the facts in a convincing way:

> *Dealing with war labor on the farm was ahout the most unsatisfactory work I have ever done... Labor was scarce and high. Very little work could he gotten out of negroes, because there were too many people who wanted your laborers ... Every one who depended on negro labor knows how hard it was to hire and work negroes during the war. It seemed that every thing drew labor away from the farm... With the factories and the army draining out the labor, the farmers had to suffer.* [24]

The controversies which undermined Georgia in those months never flew into an open opposition as they came from parties which, for different reasons, did not have the necessary determination and strength. The notables would have their reason for fearing possible censures or even penal measures, for they belonged with various tasks to the inflexible war machine established by the federal government. Secondly, even if very widespread, farmers' rumours came from places which were very distant one from an other and, as there was no longer a leader as Tom Watson could have been, they concentrated the dissent on the exaggerated intrusion of draft on everyday life rather than on specific ideological matters.

In spite of the efforts made, the Georgia Council of Defense report of September 1918 acknowledged the presence of this upset atmosphere. On one hand associating expressions like *state of panic, great difficulty* with the farmers' world but, on the other hand, without providing possible solutions, a very worrying picture was outlined:

> *Unless there are soldiers all of our exertions are without purpose, but every soldier taken from the farms reduces production and hampers harvesting. The problem, therefore, is extremely delicate and intricate, requiring the very greatest patience, ability, investigation and study in order that it may be wisely solved.* [25]

Georgia' precarious organization and unpreparedness during mobilization pointed out its pre-war considerable social and political delay compared to the other southern states, probably excepting only Mississippi. Such difference would have become

more marked if there had not been the end of the war, with the consequent slackening of emergency measures and the return home of draftees, of whom just a slight part had actually left for Europe.

However, there remained the impression of a ruling class incompetent in organizing a state efficient and credible structure capable of obtaining the farmers' support. If the collected data speak in favour of a general prosperity during the war, this does not necessarily mean the status of most tenant farmers improved accordingly. The fact that the desertion rate among them was not particularly high is not a convincing argument to prove the absence of their disappointment at the vague promises of help and assistance for what concerned the Selective Service System. The war did not alter those basic trends of an increasing number of small farms and a rising rate of tenancy so that by the end of the war most farmers lived as they always had. Paradoxically, they were in some way induced to assume, if not with manifest hostile behaviour, an isolationist attitude in becoming concerned with personal matters or feelings rather than with general issues emphasized by the strong propaganda message.

1 E.B. Rogers to N. G. Bartlett, June 14, 1918, *Georgia State Council of Defense Papers (GSCDP)*, Georgia Department of Archives and History (GDAH).

2 Congressional Records, 65th Congress, (April 27,1917), pp. 1319-24.

3 Ibid., Appendix, p.169, p. 179

4 Thirteenth Census of the United States, State Compendium Georgia, Population.

5 Chambers II pp. 45-46.

6 Coleman pp. 188-189.

7 *Atlanta Constitution*, July 14, 1917.

8 On Tom Watson and his influence on the rural masses see: C. Vann Woodward and J. Brown.

9 *Atlanta Constitution*, September 22, 1917

10 *Atlanta Constitution*, August 1, 1918

11 *Atlanta Constitution*, March 9,1918. Before the war J. J. Brown had been for a long time a close pohtrcal ally of Tom Watson.

12 Brown to T. Page, April 23, 1918, *GSCDP*, GDAH.

13 B.H Clifton to Governor Hugh M. Dorsey, May 30, 1918, *GSCDP*, GDAH.

14 B.L. Usury to Governor Hugh M. Dorsey, June 10, 1918, *GSCDP*, GDAH.

15 Joe McDonald to Governor Hugh M. Dorsey, June 11, 1918, *GSCDP*, GDAH.

16 *Report of Chairman Georgia Council of Defense*, September 11, 1918, Byrd Printing Company, State Printers, 1919

17 *Report of the Bureau of Farm Furloughs for the first month of operation ending July 1918, GSCDP,* GDAH.

18 W. J. Norns to Governor Hugh M. Dorsey, June 16,1918, *GSCDP,* GDAH.

19 Colonel O. Edwards to N. G. Bartlett, June 26, 1918, *GSCDP,* GDAH.

20 Governor Hugh M.Dorsey to N. G. Bartlett, June 20, 1918, *GSCDP,* GDAH.

21 *Proceedings of the Third Annual Session of the Georgia Historical Association,* Atlanta, April 12, 1919, William Russell Pullen Library. Georgia State University.

22 *Memorandum to Organization Department Council of National Defense, Washington,* Council of National Defense Papers, National Archives, Suitland Md.

23 For this see Paul T. Murray and W. Allison Sweeney.

24 *The Negroes of Clarke County, Georgia, During the Great War,* Phelps-Stokes Fellowship Studies No. 5, Bulletin of the University of Georgia, Athens, September 1919.

25 *Report of Chairman Georgia Council of Defense,* p. 18.

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