Some Problems of Agriculture in Western Europe

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In 1798 the English economist Malthus pointed out the tendency of population to increase faster than food production. He observed that a balance between the two was maintained only as a result of famine, pestilence, and war. At that time, 150 years ago, the population of Britain was about one-fourth of what it is now, but food production was insufficient to maintain a uniformly high standard of living. Western European countries likewise had difficulty in supplying their own needs. From that time to the present, they have imported increasing quantities of foodstuffs from other parts of the world.

When the Army assigned me to Military Government in Europe some four years ago, one of my fellow officers remarked that it seemed rather presumptuous to send agricultural advisors to Europe, when it was well known that the European peasant produced five or ten times as much on an acre as our own farmers do. While I could not agree with him as to the accuracy of the comparison, it is true that the productivity of western European soils has been conserved for hundreds of years, and crop yields have been brought up to comparatively high levels. This apparently is the result of a fortunate combination of circumstances. The early settlement of the land occurred under a system of ownership and laws which encouraged forest conservation and a land use pattern which pretty well fitted the capabilities of the land. The conditions of land tenure encouraged conservation rather than exploitation. The climate is such as to minimize erosion; frequent, gentle rains are the rule, rather than the alternation of drought and sudden torrential rains which characterizes the climate of much of central United States. And finally, in the past hundred years the scientific approach to soil and crop management problems has been applied with good results.

Before the war and in its early stages, agriculture in central and western Europe was more productive than ever before. Up to 1939, the Continent produced 90% of its food requirements, including 95% of its protein requirements and 78% of its fat requirements. About 22% of the total calories were supplied by foods of animal origin. In Germany, with a population of 338 per square mile, 85% of the food supply was of domestic origin, the only substantial deficit being in fats and oils. The energy value of rationed foods for the average consumer in Europe was estimated at 2,100 to 2,250 calories daily. Nonrationed foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, made a considerable contribution to the diet. This was true in Germany up to 1943.

In attempting to find some of the answers to questions I have borne in mind that 18 or 20 years in three or four countries of Europe do not make me as an authority on European agriculture. I am well aware that many members of the Society have studied agricultural problems in Europe more intensively and more recently than I. The list of questions I have borne in mind that 18 or 20 months for your consideration is of necessity incomplete; it is suggestive rather than comprehensive. If our time schedule permits, I am sure that members of the Society will wish to offer additional information and comments.

I shall discuss the following problems:

The soils; supplies of commercial fertilizer and farm implements; individual soil and crop management practices; improvements requiring community action, as for example the consolidation of ownership patterns; and coordination of government and private agencies for agricultural research, extension work, and education.

SOILS

The soils of western Europe are largely brown podzolic soils, not naturally fertile but responsive to good management practices. Cultivable soils have mostly been under cultivation many generations but have been maintained in a rather highly productive state by the use of

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