

MEAUX IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

In August 1914 Meaux had about 13,000 inhabitants, of which some 2,400 were mobilized to fight in the First World War. During the conflict some 492 Meldois (inhabitants of Meaux) would be killed, fighting for France during the First World War, their names are recorded on the city's memorial.



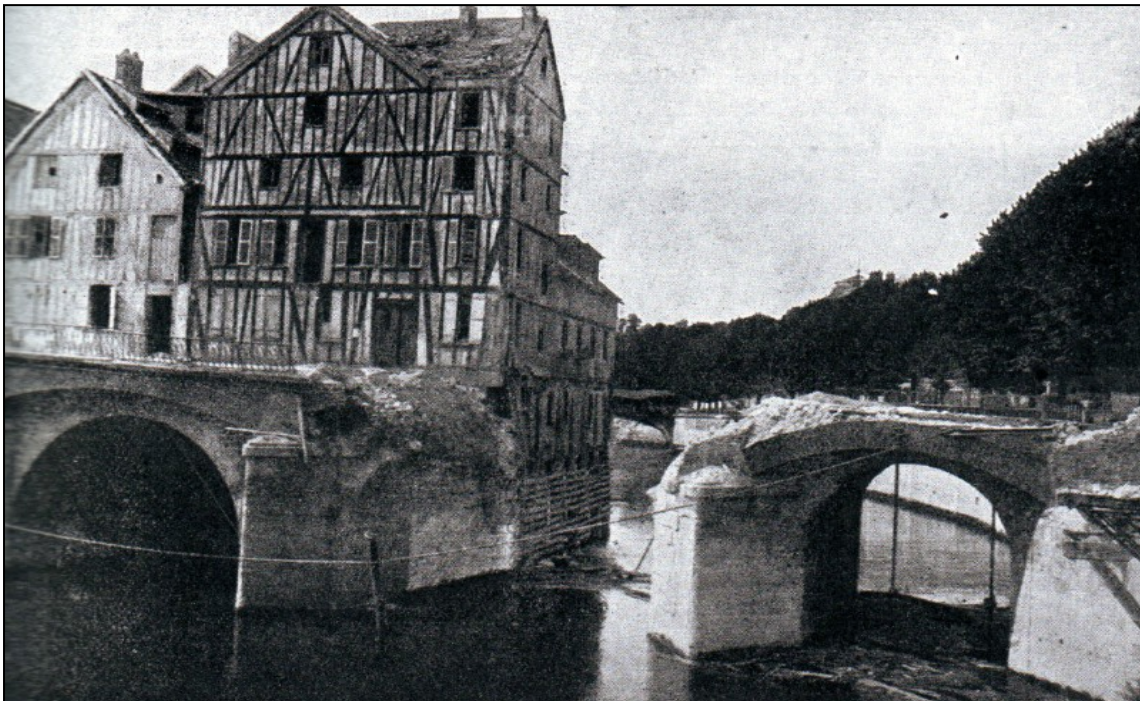
One of the greatest battles that France ever fought took place at the gates of Meaux. Its geographical position and its activities ensured that the city and its people remained at the heart of the conflict.



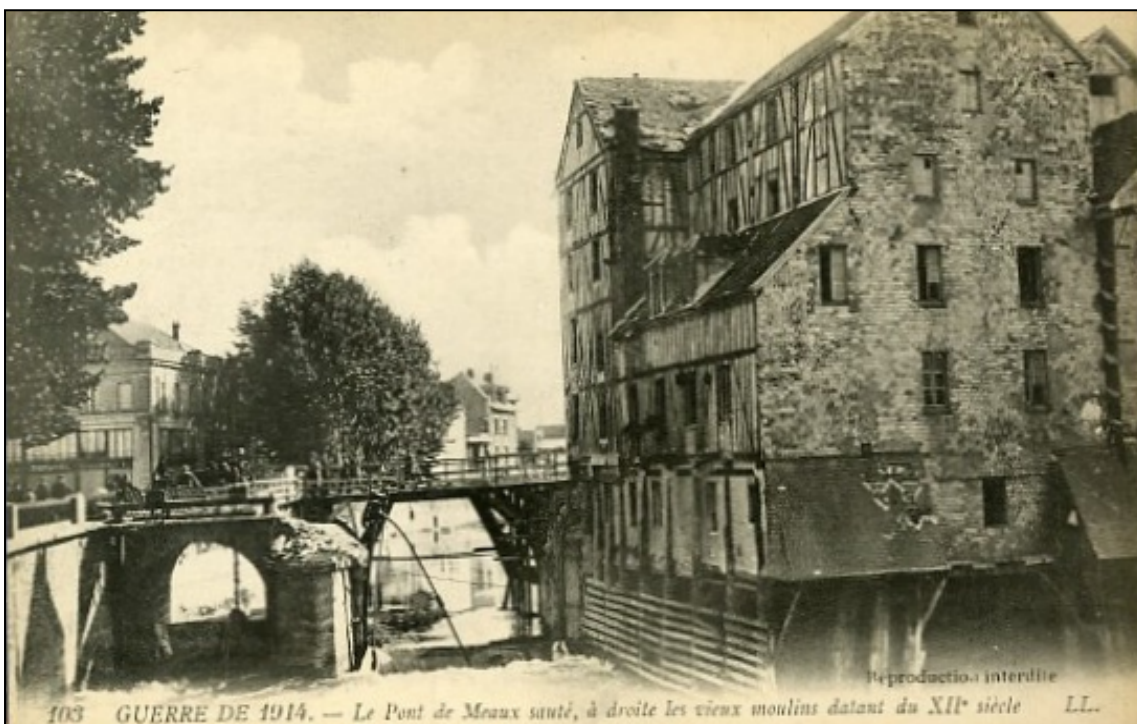
The First Battle of the Marne marked the end of the German sweep into France and the beginning of the trench warfare that was to characterise World War One.

Germany's grand Schlieffen Plan to conquer France entailed a wheeling movement of the northern wing of its armies through central Belgium to enter France near Lille. It would turn west near the English Channel and then south to cut off the French retreat. If the plan succeeded, Germany's armies would simultaneously encircle the French Army from the north and capture Paris.

A French offensive in Lorraine prompted German counter-attacks that threw the French back onto a fortified barrier. Their defence strengthened, they could send troops to reinforce their left flank - a redistribution of strength that would prove vital in the Battle of the Marne. The German northern wing was weakened further by the removal of 11 divisions to fight in Belgium and East Prussia. The German 1st Army, under Kluck, then swung north of Paris, rather than south west, as intended. This required them to pass into the valley of the River Marne across the Paris defences, exposing them to a flank attack and a possible counter-envelopment.



Pont du Moulin at Meaux on the River Marne, demolished by French Sappers.



On 3 September, Joffre ordered a halt to the French retreat and three days later his reinforced left flank began a general offensive. Kluck was forced to halt his advance prematurely in order to support his flank: he was still no further up the Marne Valley than Meaux.

On 9 September Bülow learned that the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was advancing into the gap between his 2nd Army and Kluck. He ordered a retreat, obliging Kluck to do the same. The counterattack of the French 5th and 6th Armies and the BEF developed into the First Battle of the Marne, a general counter-attack by the French Army. By 11 September the Germans were in full retreat.

This remarkable change in fortunes was caused partially by the exhaustion of many of the German forces: some had marched more than 240km (150 miles), fighting frequently. The German advance was also hampered by demolished bridges and railways, constricting their supply lines, and they had underestimated the resilience of the French.

The Germans withdrew northward from the Marne and made a firm defensive stand along the Lower Aisne River. Here the benefits of defence over attack became clear as the Germans repelled successive Allied attacks from the shelter of trenches: the First Battle of the Aisne marked the real beginning of trench warfare on the Western Front.

In saving Paris from capture by pushing the Germans back some 72km (45 miles), the First Battle of the Marne was a great strategic victory, as it enabled the French to continue the war. However, the Germans succeeded in capturing a large part of the industrial north east of France, a serious blow. Furthermore, the rest of 1914 bred the geographic and tactical deadlock that would take another three years and countless lives to break.

After the First Battle of the Marne, while the troops were bogged down in the trenches of the Somme, the Aisne, and the Argonne, refugees arrived in the city. Children who fled the Germans were back in school, factories that were closed opened again and people began to work in the fields. Women, mothers, children or elderly men contributed to the effort, although all suffered physically and morale was low.

From the beginning of the Great War, France intended to host a number of Serbian students in its schools and a resolution to this effect was passed by the French Parliament. The transportation of Serbian students to France started in December 1915 with 25 young Serbian refugees were welcomed to college.



In February 1916 the charity run by the Franco-Belgian Green Cross the "Soldiers' Cloakroom" was set up in Meaux. After a year of operation, it had distributed items of clothing to 1,150 soldiers: 4925 items of underwear and knitwear. The ladies of the Cloakroom added a library to their enterprise.

Parisian publishers including Plon, Hachette Livre and Delagrave donated 400 pounds which was made available to soldiers.

In March 1916 an advertisement was published in Le Journal de la Brie "Foreign labour required for agricultural work, Annamites, (Vietnamese) Chinese or Kabyle (Algerians) are welcome."

From April 1916 girls and children, gathered under the aegis of the Committee of French Memory, to make 1069 crowns and crosses to place on soldiers' graves. In fact, outside of school hours, school children were encouraged to work on the land.

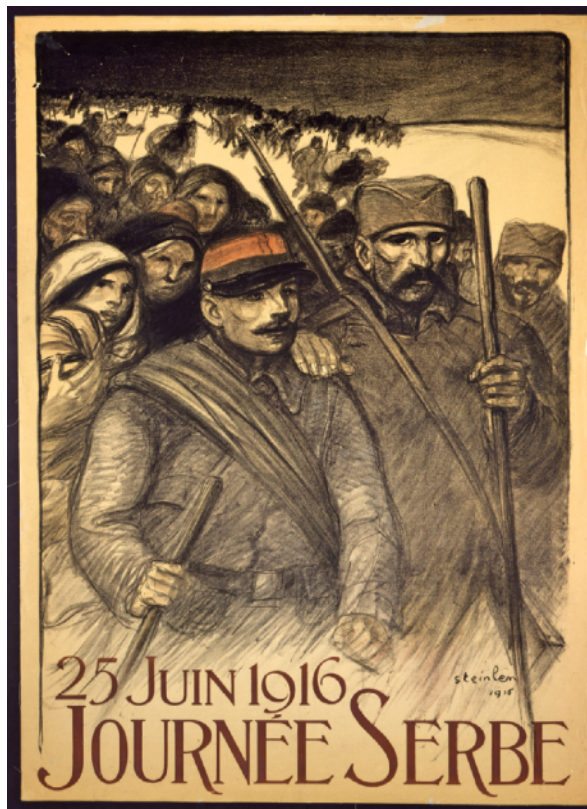
This participation in agricultural work was not specific to the city of Meaux but included the entire territory. Much municipal land was prepared and cultivated by school children, (often growing potatoes).

A newspaper cutting from Le Briard Meaux dated 5 May 1916 is quoted as saying "At Meaux, at least 500 children under the age of three, including 115 children from 105 families were assisted by the welfare office."

In June 1916 the following photo shows a visit to the Military Hospital No. 21 was organized. This hospital is located in Boulevard Jean Rose and was under the ownership of the Ville Boisnet family. The matron of the hospital was Mme. Haillot, who relied on 35 "brave nurses" of the Red Cross to care for 170 beds.



On 25 June, 1916 the local newspaper announced that "Today is "Serbian Day". Young volunteers roam the city and offer stickers and badges.



Also on 25 June, 1916 it was announced that Cultivators and Market Farmers of Meaux offer jobs to women who want to work on the land. The labour crisis in agriculture and industry is severe, 8000 former employees are at the front and their jobs are now performed by 6,400 women, children, and elderly men.

To ensure output, a military workforce assisted. It was not uncommon for soldiers on leave to work on the land, during what should have been their time of rest. Prisoners of war were also set to work producing food.

In November 1916, twenty days leave were given to classes 1889 to 1892 (those who had turned 20 years of age) so they could help with sowing crops.

As the war continued, other rank German combatant prisoners held by France were put to work; officer prisoners were held in better conditions and were exempt from working.

From the start of the conflict, France employed combatant prisoners of war on "public works" schemes. Under the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 other rank prisoners of war could be put to work by the captor state provided that the tasks on which they were employed had no connection with the captor state's war effort.

France interpreted this prohibition loosely: it forbade prisoners to handle munitions directly. However, it did permit prisoners to be used to unload ships carrying war material at Channel ports; to quarry stone or carry out forestry work; to engage in road building tasks; and to work on railways, agriculture and in mines.

In June and August 1915, France and Germany each claimed that the other was using prisoners of war for war work: when Germany failed to respond promptly to the French protest note of 31 August 1915, France "leapt to its advantage."¹ In October 1915, France declared that "it considers itself from now on released from all international obligations on this point".

In 1916, France began to use German prisoners of war in permanent "prisoner of war labour companies" that worked for the French army directly in the front area and the military zone to the immediate rear of the front.

By 26 January 1917, 22,915 German prisoners were working in prisoner of war labour companies. According to Isabel Hull, France may even have been using prisoner labourers unofficially in the army zone as early as July 1915. By July of 1916, 50 percent of all German prisoners held by France were working for the French army either in prisoner of war labour companies in the war zone or for the army on the home front. While manual labour on the French home front was demanding, prisoners of war were relatively well fed throughout the war.

An article on 22 July 1916 noted that 'Schools at that time were not mixed; girls and boys were educated separately. 47 of 59 boys and 72 girls of 81 passed the examination called "Certificat d'étude ". Study for this qualification began at age 10 and the examination was taken at the age of 14 years.'

On 15 August 1916, it was announced by the Mayor's wife Madame Lugol that she had started a sewing room that opened every Friday from 14 to 18 hours. It accommodated up to 200 women who produced shirts, pants, sweaters, haversacks. The women were paid for their work.

A Court statement issued on 23 August 1916, said that Judge Fougery had issued an arrest warrant for Marie Bosson, guilty of carrying out an abortion on a young girl. A provisional release has been set for mid-September.

An article on 9 September, 1916 mentioned that at the beginning of the war, families did not need to pay postage when they sent packages to soldiers. Later, they were expected to pay postage. This was a blow to some soldiers. Some families were extreme poor, such as the Lanterre family. The father left on 1 August 1914 leaving his wife alone and helpless with five children. Without taking the aid to which she was entitled, four of her children died from malnutrition. To protect families, prosecution of judicial seizures of goods were suspended.

On Sunday, 10 September, 1916, at the cathedral, the Bishop of Meaux, Monsignor Marbeau, celebrated the anniversary of the Battle of the Marne in the presence of the Bishops of the bombed cities of Arras and of Reims.



The Municipal Archives of Meaux show that on 27 September 1916, regarding dairy products, there was a shortage of milk in the city of Meaux. The price of livestock (cows) was high and farmers could not replace those they sold. As a consequence, mothers were no longer able to get the milk they needed for their children.



The market place in Meaux

The municipality decided to take measures to ensure an increased supply. The milk produced and consumed in Meaux was 935 litres per day, not including butter or cheese. Also in 1916, Millers, formed into unions, abruptly raising the price of a bag of flour. Naturally this increase had an immediate impact on the price of bread.

The Prefect of Seine-et-Marne protested strongly to the Millers who argued that neighbouring millers had reproached them for selling too cheaply. Thankfully, the application of the law put an end to this outrageous speculation.

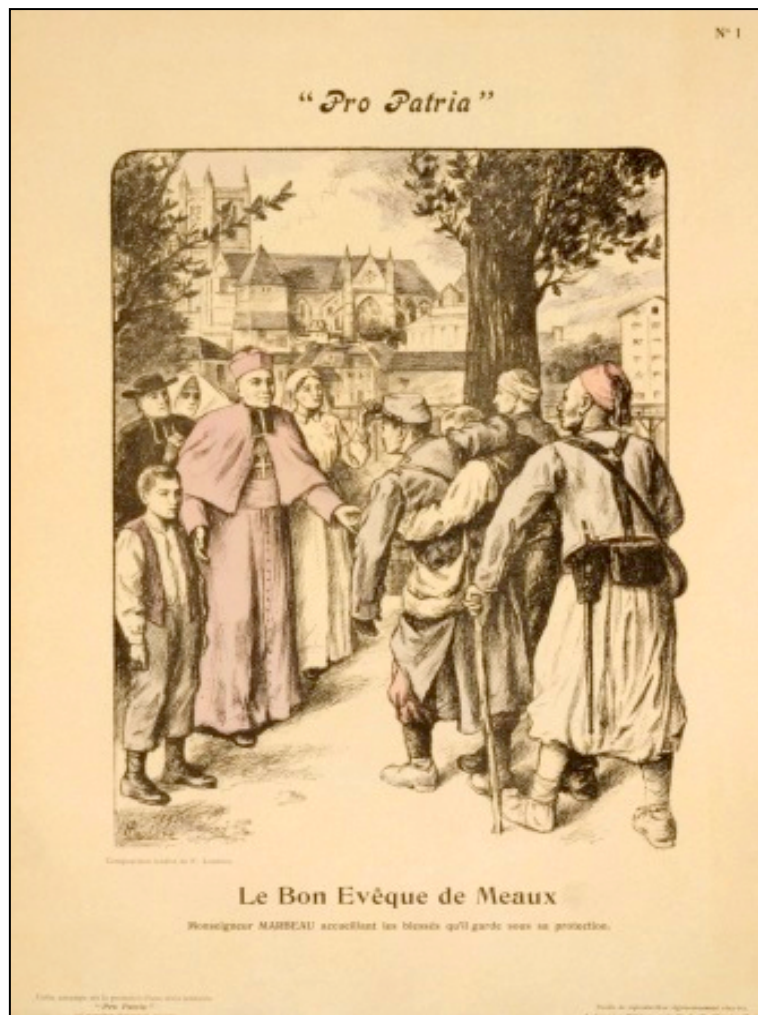


The Railway Station at Meaux

During October 1916 it was reported that on several occasions, two women, Tisseron and Prioux, were arrested for prostitution with civilians as well as soldiers.

On 5 November, 1916 it was reported of the Mass for the wounded being celebrated in the cathedral. A collection was taken at the doors by nurses from the Red Cross. The following week, a Mass was celebrated for the city's war orphans.

And from the winter of 1916-1917 that food was scarce and it became difficult to feed children. A monthly allowance was awarded to any mother nursing a baby. A premium per hundredweight of wheat for each hectare cultured, was decreed. The cost of living increased by 34% in France (against 117% in Germany).



The Bishop of Meaux with nurses and a member of the clergy, welcoming some wounded soldiers.

