

France in World War I

by Nick Stafford

As part of my work on the stage play of War Horse I investigated the invasion and occupation of (part of) France in 1914, because a significant proportion of the story takes place in and around an occupied farm. However, I did this as a fiction writer, not a historian. My interest in history whilst writing a play like War Horse is as the backdrop. It is also undergrowth to snuffle around in, where I hope to glimpse how life was lived.

So I read about the occupation, imagined it, then, in anticipation of the questions the rest of the team would ask when we came to stand, say, the French characters of Paulette and Emilie on their feet, rather than give pages of documents or a talk, I wrote these monologues, and supplied figures that tell their own story.

PAULETTE: There were lots of rumours about what Germany was up to. Travellers came through and said that they'd entered Belgium. They'd done this because our own border with them was defended. To come through Belgium was to outflank our defences. No-one knew what to do. The trains that ran the line ten kilometres away were becoming less frequent, someone said. Jean and I tried to go into the village more often but hard news was impossible to get.

One or two villagers said they weren't taking any chances – they took their portable possessions and went further into France. You can't move a farm like that though, can you? We talked about sending Emilie somewhere but with whom, to whom? She can't go alone. And then what if the Germans did come, would we ever see Emilie again?

We cleared out the cellar and equipped it with food and water and candles and bedding. We disguised its entrance. Then one day we saw three German soldiers on horses. They were up on the hill with spy glasses, then they went away. Jean took our best horse and went to find out what was happening. In our last hurried conversation he said he didn't know what he should do – like all men he'd done his National Service so he knew how to be a soldier. Perhaps that's where he went.

The Germans came and occupied us. They took over the administration and we all have new papers that we must carry at all times. They took an exhaustive inventory of everything – animals, crops, curtains, bowls, cutlery, books, furniture – everything. Sometimes they come around and ask where such and such a thing has gone and we have

to be able to account for it or face gaol. We are not allowed out after dark, and we can't gather in groups of more than three.

To travel to the next village we must obtain a passport. Soldiers requisition whatever they need - horses, of course, also cows, pigs, potatoes, cotton sheets, ornaments, men. Any French men must work in their labour camps here, in Belgium, and in Germany. Everything is directed towards Germany's benefit. The churches hold Protestant services for them.

Someone was caught with a telegraph terminal. They were tried and shot. There are rumours of French and British soldiers who were caught behind the German advance living in woods and in people's cupboards. What was once our land is now a gaol. We can hear the guns. They say we are part of Germany, now.

EMILIE: Papa and mama frowned and did a lot of whispering. We made a den in the cellar. Papa rode off and strange men came. I didn't understand them. They have many, many guns, swords, horses. There are lots of these men. Mama tells me to be very, very careful around them. She cries in the night.

I still go to school, but monsieur Didot isn't our teacher any more, it's a woman called Madame Thiery. We're all hungry, all the time. We still grow food, but the men take it. Mama's hidden some potatoes and apples, but I'm not supposed to tell. She says the men will go away again. I ask when?

