

Saving Poland's "Children of the Children." "Food for the Small Democracies," 1939–1942 & 1946

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Abstract

The National Committee on Food for the Small Democracies was formed to "raise a voice on behalf of the peoples of Finland, Norway, Holland, Belgium, and Central Poland" shortly after the Nazi invasion. Former President of the United States Herbert Hoover organized the committee, and its mission statement was dramatic: "To the end that the lives of millions of children, women, and men can be saved from the inevitable famine and pestilence which confront them, and that renewed hope may be given to them in the ideals of mankind." Over 37 million people's lives were threatened. The Americans forming the committee included 600 dedicated professionals and 3,000 members of the clergy along with numerous supporting organizations. Their speeches carried strong titles: "Why the Hoover Plan Will Not Aid Hitler?," "Can This Famine Be Prevented?," and "Must They Starve?" Hoover's appeal to save "the innocent victims of war" was based on personal experience, for he had already saved millions of lives - especially those of children - from starvation during the previous global conflict. Now, in Poland, Belgium and elsewhere, he would be saving "the children of the children."

Along the 35,000 miles we have traveled, I have seen with my own eyes the grimmest spectre of famine in all the history of the world. The reconstruction of the children is more precious than factories or bridges. They will determine the good or evil future of Europe.

Herbert Hoover, *An American Epic: The Guns Cease Killing & the Saving of Life from Famine Begins* (1964)

“At the outbreak of World War II,” as Herbert Hoover began his memoir over ten years later in 1951, “the leaders and peoples of the German-occupied democracies appealed to me again to organize their relief, especially for the women and children. I could not refuse their appeals.” And yet this relief would not be welcomed by Allied World leaders. Hoover clearly stated his failings in this relief effort: “Owing to the opposition of Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt we were unable to organize this relief systematically.”

“Despite these difficulties we did furnish relief to some 200,000 children in Poland for part of the war – Finland during the first Russian invasion.” For almost three years – from September 1939 until the end of 1942 – Hoover and his associates worked on food relief efforts for the five countries, which they termed “the Small Democracies.” Hoover now realized that he needed “to create public opinion behind us” and organized thousands of committees in the United States and passed several resolutions in Congress unanimously. “It became a crusade,” admitted Hoover, “on my part against a senseless stone wall of opposition from Churchill and Roosevelt.” He continued, “In the sense of obtaining adequate food, we were defeated. But we did keep some moral and spiritual lamps alight among our own people during the eclipse of human compassion and decency which swept over the world.” The following sentiment he admitted to his memoirs: “I would never have slept either on this or the other side of the grave had I not done the utmost that was within me for these hundreds of millions of people” (Hoover, 1951a, pp. 1–2).

Seven countries, ultimately, would appeal to Hoover for aid: Poland on 16 September 1939; Finland on 3 December 1939; Belgium on 30 May 1940; Luxembourg on 30 May 1940; the Netherlands on 24 July 1940; Norway on 3 September 1940; and Greece in July 1941. Through their “heart-rending” appeals, they clamored for relief on behalf of their destitute civilians.

“Entirely beyond the saving of infinite human suffering it seemed to me,” as Hoover further explained the furtiveness to their work, “that

if civilization was to survive, we had a primary duty to at least prevent the moral and physical degeneration in children that is inevitable from malnutrition that accompanies war. The future of Europe would depend far more upon this oncoming generation than upon all the Leagues to preserve peace, balances of power or military alliances" (p. 4).

Hoover's colleagues, his "tried men of the last war," would again join him in the task of providing relief for Poland: Chauncey McCormick, Maurice Pate, Hugh Gibson, Hallam Tuck, Edgar Rickard, Perrin Galpin, Lewis Strauss, Frederick Walcott. McCormick would be chairman and Pate president. Hoover described this pair of McCormick and Pate as "two of the great blessings to the human race" (Maurice Pate would ultimately be the executive director of UNICEF from 1947 until 1965).

On 11 October 1939, when Hoover addressed a large Polish-American meeting in New York City, he called upon their Polish patriotism. "The spirit of a great race does not die from oppression," began Hoover. "Poland is not dead. Poland will rise again." Unusually, Hoover proved rather rousing: "We have the faith that someday a new Poland will rise again... We know that a people who have fought for a thousand years, who have lost and won again, will not die" (p. 8).

By the end of 1939, Finland called upon Hoover's generosity and engineering creativity. "The scene in Finland today is one of smoking ruins," recalled Hoover. "Thousands of destroyed homes and villages. Thousands of destitute men, women, and children. Thousands of sick and wounded. Next ninety days, what then?" The former president added poignantly, "No decent nation can refuse these appeals for help. And there are questions not alone of human suffering. There are questions which affect the whole defense of freedom and liberty in the world" (p. 12).

Yet Hoover felt as if poison were being poured upon his painstaking philanthropy with rumors that Steve Early, Roosevelt's secretary, was giving yet another order (with the President's authority) to "stop that fellow Hoover." Apparently, Roosevelt had muttered, "We don't want him to get anywhere." Whether rumor or fact, the insinuation stung.

Another strange conflict would arise when the American Communists organized "noisy protest groups" near public meetings for the Small Democracies in New York, Minneapolis, Duluth, Detroit, Chicago, and Peoria. "No reminder of mine to these Communists," Hoover sadly mentioned, "that our same group of men had organized relief for the famine in Communist Russia in 1932–1933 had any effect upon them" (p. 11).

Yet the detractors to relief efforts – were they negligent, naïve, or perhaps Nazis?

Hoover then issued another press statement. "Somebody must raise a voice for food supply during the coming winter to the 27,000,000 innocent civilians, mostly women and children." Hunger and disease threatened daily. These little countries – Hoover believed – "were being ground between the millstones of the food blockade" (p. 14).

But Hoover also held a personal reason, deep inside, that the Germans would accept his conditions due to their First World War experience with “my men,” if the German officials would only remember his service in saving their children from starvation after the Armistice in 1918. “I believed they would be disposed to be helpful,” Hoover wistfully recalled. “The desire of the Nazis at that time,” as he reminded his potential readers, “was to appear that they were not barbarians – but rather high-class gentlemen and not brutes.” The Nazis, of course, remembered no such action nor felt any such loyalty.

However, many Americans and British leaders and citizens wanted to enforce a strict blockade not only of Germany but of Italy, France, and all other countries allied with or occupied by Nazi Germany (p. 15). “Let Hitler bear his responsibilities to the full,” stated the blockade rhetoric, “and let the people of Europe who groan beneath his yoke aid in every way the coming of the day when it will be broken.”

“The use for munitions of the type of food we needed for children,” as Hoover would argue back, “(milk, chocolate, fats and meat) was sheer nonsense” (p. 16). The former president believed that Churchill had taken exactly the same attitude in 1914 with regard to relief efforts intended for Belgium, and had apparently never forgotten his being overridden at Hoover’s insistence by the British Cabinet. In his own memoir footnote, Hoover added this about Churchill – “The war was his personal concern in which his reputation as a Generalissimo was at stake. Therefore, irrespective of consequences, his policy was to force a life and death struggle on Germany, and by every means in his power to annihilate her” (p. 20).

This would be the ultimate argument, which diplomatic historian James H. George would describe as “the vexing issue.” Hoover deeply believed in “the provision of cross-blockade relief to Europe,” and that the Germans would respect the feeding of children. Churchill deeply believed that nothing should cross the blockade, not even food for children, as this would only aid the enemy and prolong the war. George also notes two simultaneous motivations for Hoover’s “cross-blockade program”: one, Hoover was firmly convinced that he could relieve the suffering of European children, and two, he trusted that this feeding program would allow him to “recoup his reputation” from failed president to successful humanitarian, again (George, 1992). Whatever the case may have been, the plan of providing food aid to Continental Europe had to wait until after the Second World War.

On 12 March 1940, a mass meeting at Madison Square Garden and another in Chicago would be organized to help feed over 200,000 undernourished children in Polish ghettos. “We managed to get about 5,150,000 pounds of food and medical supplies to the Polish children – and no doubt saved many lives,” Hoover declared. “The attitude of Churchill and Roosevelt made it a heartbreaking undertaking.”

Attempts were made to continue the relief effort, and the numbers involved were impressive: 330 well-known churchmen from 16 denominations, as well as 55 bishops and archbishops, 36 university and college presidents, and 160 important professors, 400 professional business and farm leaders, and 92 editors and writers. In addition to this national committee of over a thousand members, Hoover added 2,500 local committees of church, business, labor, and agriculture. "The organization included members of every creed, race and political color" (Hoover, 1951a, p. 21) (it seems that the phrase "political color" was borrowed from the Democrats).

"This Committee [for the Small Democracies] has been formed so there might be opportunity for expression of American feeling that steps should be taken to prevent starvation in Finland, Norway, Holland, Belgium, and Central Poland. Before the next harvest," stated Hoover, "theirs will be a tragic problem of loss of lives of millions of children, of women and of men, and the aftermath of a stunted and diseased generation. The Committee feels certain that the American people wish every possible step to be taken that will save these millions of innocent lives."

"Those five little nations, comprise about 37 million people, of whom about 15 million are children. About one-half of these people live in towns and cities. They are of all religious faiths - about 13 million are Protestants, 3 ½ million are Jews, and more than 20 million are Catholics" (pp. 22-23).

The relief efforts for the Occupied Democracies continued into 1941, but Hoover and "his men" certainly felt helpless as they could not organize the supply of aid on the scale of that provided to Belgium from 1914 through 1919, when rationing had assisted the entire population of 8,000,000 people. Now the campaign had to confine itself to the operation of soup kitchens set up by Belgium women to sustain some 2,000,000 children and 1,000,000 "destitute adults."

The relief forces were somehow importing 25,000 tons of food a month - fats, milk, meat products, beans, etc. for the "soup" kitchens, plus an extra meal for "the especially undernourished children." Yet these amounts and numbers were not nearly enough. "The stock of imported food within Belgium at any one time," Hoover routinely emphasized, "would not feed Germany six hours even if it were all seized; therefore, it could have no military importance" (p. 26).

On 16 February 1941, Hoover addressed a mass meeting in Chicago. "The world is faced again with gigantic problems of famine and pestilence," he stated as he proceeded to present his five point plan. But mostly he talked about the humanitarian aspect for America, overall "the question of humanity."

Can you believe that American public opinion or the spiritual leadership of America has so lost its bearings as to be opposed even to an effort to aid those who lie in the ditch of war? [...] I am aware that 3000 miles away in the surrounds

of our American homes it is difficult to envisage what all this means... [...] I have seen the agonies of famine. I have listened to the pleadings of children, the fierce demands of mothers for the right of their children to live. I have seen relief stations and hospitals filled with its consequence in distorted minds and bodies. [...] I have witnessed it in twenty nations. I have seen starvation's unending blight upon the world. [...] I know starvation in the last war had a large part in the cause of the world's agony today. I had hoped it would never again come to the world. But it has come and I would be untrue to myself and to my country if I did not fight it to the end" (pp. 30–31).

"The obvious truth," Hoover began yet another press conference in 1940, "is that there will be wholesale starvation, death and disease in these little countries unless something is done about it." The little democracies – the countries of Belgium, Holland, Poland, and Norway – had collapsed by that year. The emergency canteens and the numbers of children that were saved only continued for no more than a year. And Hoover continued to believe Winston Churchill had purposefully introduced the blockade, needlessly. "Churchill was the chief obstacle," Hoover wrote years later when Churchill was no longer prime minister. "He was a militarist of the extreme school who held that the incidental starvation of women and children was justified if it contributed to the earlier ending of the war by victory."

Poland had proved particularly vulnerable. Hoover's Polish Relief Commission had set up canteens in Polish ghettos and poor districts, where they had, despite the odds, been feeding up to two hundred thousand people per day when Chamberlain's government allowed civilian relief food through the blockade. "When Churchill succeeded Chamberlain as Prime Minister in May 1940," Hoover stated, "he soon stopped all permits of food relief to Poland" (Baker, 2008, pp. 166, 220).

Later that year, on 19 October, Hoover delivered a radio speech. "There were about forty million children in the German-invaded democracies," he began, "and the blockade was killing them." His voice echoed on the airwaves: "Their pleas for food ascend hourly to the free democracies of the west."

"Is the Allied cause any further advanced today as a consequence of this starvation of children?" Hoover asked as he cited two reports about Belgium's hunger and another authored by Dr. Szoszkies within Warsaw's Jewish ghetto. "Are Hitler's armies any less victorious than if these children had been saved? Are Britain's children better fed today because these millions of former allied children have been hungry or died? Can you point to one benefit that has been gained from this holocaust?" (Hoover, 1951a, p. 417).

8 May 1945. "We took no satisfaction," ex-president Hoover reminded his Carnegie Hall audience on V-E Day, "that our repeated warnings

over the years had come true." Despite the ending of the Second World War in Europe on that day, Hoover, continuing to believe in the righteousness of his cause, began his speech with the haunting details of the increasing "starving and stunting of the bodies and minds of the children of the democracies." He desperately desired some type of humanitarian action, and his graphic description carried a warning of urgency: "It is now 11:59 on the clock of starvation..." (Hoover, 1964, pp. 102–103).

On 28 May, just six weeks after taking the highest office, President Truman requested that Herbert Hoover visit the White House to offer his advice about the United States Army's proposed emergency action for the liberated countries. During that fateful summer, the War Department would furnish a million tons of rations per month, but the scenario of starvation seemed destined to worsen.

This initial visit would be courteous but brief. President Truman was trying to end two wars – the overwhelming global war of six years, as well as the political personal war that had developed during Roosevelt's twelve years in office. A "Hoover Visit" to the White House had been long in coming. Just six weeks after being sworn in as president, Truman started anew and, despite his Democrats' warnings, sought Hoover's perspectives about the aftermath of the Second World War. Hoover certainly remained the esteemed famine relief expert with both his engineering mind and humanitarian touch. But events plummeted during the immediate postwar era, with an eventful summer, a confusing fall, and then a dreadful winter. Within ten months of the end of the conflict, the world was forced to endure a series of emergencies accompanied by a poor autumn harvest, and many of the world's people now faced "The Greatest Famine in all History."

At the beginning of March 1946, President Truman appointed former President Herbert Hoover as chair of the Famine Relief Committee because his expertise and diligence had saved millions of European lives during the Great War with "Hooverizing" campaigns of "Wheatless Wednesdays" and "Meatless Fridays." During the Second World War, rationing efforts initially seemed patriotic, with citizens meeting sacrifices enthusiastically, but later on in the conflict – and having in mind their new-found prosperity – Americans did not want to deny themselves luxury goods of meat and sugar. Hoover would have to develop new strategies based on Truman's advice about the changing world order.

Six days after Churchill's famous "The Sinews of Peace" speech in Fulton, Missouri, where he described "the iron curtain," Hoover delivered two radio broadcasts, the first on 11 March and the second on 16 March, before departing on his global famine survey. As he neared the conclusion of the former, he noted, "To whatever extent we succeed in this task, we shall have given that much health, courage, and faith to a despondent discouraged world" (Churchill, 1946; Hoover, 1949, p. 168).

Hoover realized the difficulties ahead of him, as "the iron curtain" now hung in the balance, and he would write years later that on this

“crusade against famine,” he also had “the unique opportunity to see personally the actual operation of Communism, Socialism, Planned Economy and Free Economy at work in 36 nations.” The war had tempered both Churchill and Hoover in their rhetoric (Nash, 2013, p. 258).

On 17 March 1946, Hoover set off aboard a C-54 transport aircraft for a six-week “food study” through Europe and Asia to examine conditions, assess damage, and report needs directly to President Truman. Hoover, his name synonymous with the relief efforts organized for Belgium and Poland, would now be visiting the children of the children he had saved thirty years ago. As he responded with rare emotional expression, Europe’s scenarios, and particularly that of Poland, now appeared to him as “the grimmest spectre” and “heartbreakingly sad.”

“This account,” Hoover recorded in his last memoir, titled *An American Epic*, “is not a travelogue of journeys – of hotels good or bad, of people intelligent or apathetic, or of the incidents of such an unusual mission.” As Hoover bluntly put it, the mission had become “a race with a ghastly famine.”

When Hoover’s mission landed in Warsaw, Poland, on the evening of Thursday, 28 March, at 5 p.m., this would be their fourth but very important country to visit. The Mission Men traveled by motorcade through dark, recently cleared streets to their lodgings.

The next morning they met a large group of Polish officials at the Council of Ministers building (previously the palace where a young Chopin had given his first concert). At the long table of male Polish officials sat a woman, Irena Sendler, the now known Catholic social worker who had braved the Warsaw Ghetto, saving 2,500 children from death. Sendler submitted her formal report along with other collected statistics. “We would express how grateful we are for the trouble you have taken in coming to our city,” Sendler began her letter to Hoover. “Many people in Warsaw remember the kind, thoughtful, and efficient care manifested by you to our country after the First World War.”

Later that morning Ambassador Lane and numerous correspondents and photographers walked with Hoover and several assistants through Warsaw, destroyed in nearly ninety percent. “The city was a horror of vengeance,” Hoover surmised. The Germans had leveled it systematically, until it had become “the tomb of 200,000 Jews.” As a Polish woman remarked to Hoover during the remorseful visit, “We are weary of dying.” Upon his directions, the group paid particular attention to the soup kitchens and children’s institutions. In a rare show of deep emotion, Hoover added this sentence to his memoir: “My tour of it was a shattering experience which haunted my dreams for years” (Hoover, 1964, p. 144).

Ambassador Hugh Gibson went on a more personal and uniquely tragic walk through Warsaw – “a tour of the town which was one of increasing horror.” Gibson also attempted to describe his depth of emotion. “I have seen pictures of Warsaw,” Gibson began, “read accounts of it and

heard descriptions by eye-witnesses. But nothing gave me the slightest conception of the completeness of the destruction or the hopelessness of the present situation." Most of the old landmarks he remembered from earlier Great War famine work were decimated. "I was in a hurry to get away from this," he added, "but it only went from bad to worse."

He could not help but look back to the previous world war. "There is a striking difference from the Chief's last visit in my time," he recalled. "Then the streets were lined with cheering crowds, with thousands of children waving American flags and singing. This time the people have been given no information about the visit and there is complete apathy among those who see us driving by. No welcoming smiles." Now, in 1946, all that lined the brick rubble of the Warsaw streets would be conspicuous hesitation, a "furtive air," a "looking over the shoulder," a "feel of the police state," and too many "trigger happy soldiers" (Hugh S. Gibson Papers..., 1946).

Still, Gibson felt compelled to venture out again, and his second visit, on Saturday morning, resulted in mixed emotions: "Somehow it seemed even worse the second time." "After going into every corner of the town," he then turned to a more hopeful tale, "it is more and more of a mystery where three or four hundred thousand people can find shelter. While we were discussing this in the square a little girl of seven or eight appeared over the top of a pile of rubble and cascaded down into the street followed by fifteen or twenty more, all with their schoolbooks." Again, the Polish children offered a singular glimpse of hope: "Somewhere in the bowels of that mass of ruins they were going to school."

"It is a forbidding picture..." Hoover also concluded. Yet the children of Warsaw competed to hold Hoover's hand and, as journalists noted, "fingered his well-cut suit, for he had saved many of their fathers after World War I. But to these surviving Polish children, the ex-President was simply a wonderful and jolly American who would make everything all right." As this experienced Food Ambassador would continually remind Americans throughout this invisible year of 1946, "No one is the enemy of children" (*Children's Friend*, 1946, p. 28; *Food*, 1946, p. 19).

Wars usually end with some type of victory and a remembering of loss, with treaties and truces, ceasefires and celebrations, anniversaries and commemorations, museums and memorials all marking the final significance. Once the destruction and death cease, perhaps the masculine plot of the story is over. An exhausted Mars has both conquered and surrendered. Yet that violence and hatred which initially and continually fueled and fired a conflict does not dissipate that quickly, creating a powerful aftermath which simmers and burns, festers and explodes.

Mars emerges continually as the violent god of war, while Pax – the goddess of peace, of the olive branch and cornucopia – remains relegated to a minor role. Her role is strangely overlooked. Without the warlords and generals, without the munitions and machines, without the men

marching, guns blasting, or bombers flying – a sudden disinterest develops with the slow and tedious aftermath of war. Once the dramatic action is over, what remains is famine, disease, destruction, and devastation: the rubble and ruins, the corpses and chaos, the depression and guilt. And this ignored feminine phase of war becomes increasingly marginal and invisible. The basic human needs of feeding, cleaning, comforting, clothing, nursing, sheltering, and loving never appear as exciting or interesting. All these complicated, necessary aspects of the process of restoring humanity, both physically and emotionally, become a routine and at once messy element of the difficult mediation of peace.

This feminine aspect – the Pax phase of warfare – would be Herbert Hoover's forte, in which his unbelievable dedication, unlimited patience, extraordinary experience and remarkable success emerged, however his historic reputation and humanitarian actions – saving 800,000,000 human lives from the brink of starvation in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War – would be lost in the traditional narrative. For Hoover as a Quaker, the endgame of war was the beginning of the practice of peace. Hoover's mission of global famine relief, coordinated with both efficiency and immediacy, and conviction and compassion, has sadly become an invisible story of the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

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