

Band of Crusaders: American Humanitarians, the Great War, and the Remaking of the World

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Introduction

The origins of international humanitarian relief can be found in the American-led response to the grave and growing crisis affecting European civilians and soldiers in World War I. Immediately after the “guns of August” roared in 1914, American relief programs for Europe commenced. Private American institutions and citizens, called by one leading architect of relief a “band of crusaders” unlike the world had ever seen—a predominantly secular, Progressive, business-minded cadre—mobilized political and social networks across the world to feed and clothe some 80 million Europeans in over twenty countries. Virtually forgotten today, this activity constitutes the largest disaster assistance effort in world history and dwarfs that of the global response to the South Asian tsunami of December 2004.

Most histories of the First World War ignore the vital humanitarian contributions made by American organizations. Relief, if acknowledged, is typically portrayed as tangential to the military cataclysm. Nevertheless, relief and combat were intertwined parts of wartime policy and strategy affecting battlefield operations and tactics, and impacting the lives of soldiers and civilians. Popular metaphors that described relief programs as a “war on starvation” were not merely rhetorical flourishes. In fact, relief *and* war were often conducted for common purposes by the same institutions and individuals, and dependent upon the same organizational methods and means. Logistics, particularly the transshipment of foodstuffs, medicine, clothing, and personnel, was but the most visible arena in which humanitarian relief and combat support functioned identically: the same rail lines and canals that carried food into Belgium conveyed German munitions to the frontlines. Other important interrelationships such as these existed in this total war. Relief organizations, for example, compelled the respective governments to superintend more than just war mobilization proper and to provide massive subventions for the aid of beleaguered civilians in occupied territories and those living elsewhere as refugees—as such, they advocated a redefinition of the relationship of the individual to the state and advanced a modern understanding of human rights.

The traditional narrative that defines American “involvement” in the Great War as predominantly military overlooks the centrality of humanitarian relief. American involvement in the First World War did not begin with the U.S. declaration of war in April 1917, but rather with the repatriation of American refugees to the United States beginning in August 1914 and with the commencement of relief to Belgium in October 1914.

The most successful of the wartime relief efforts was orchestrated by the American-led Commission for Relief in Belgium and northern France (CRB) between 1914 and 1919. The CRB conducted relief with international approval and systematized worldwide charitable

contributions, including those of the Rockefeller Foundation, for these occupied nations. The scope of its work was unprecedented in the number of people to whom it provided relief and the multiyear duration over which it distributed aid. The non-governmental CRB daily fed over 9 million civilians in German-occupied Belgium and France. It assumed a quasi-nation-state status as it negotiated directly with the governments of neutral and belligerent powers, flew its own flag on a fleet of chartered relief vessels, and managed a massive and sustained, multi-billion dollar, global logistics effort of extraordinary complexity amid the dangers of war. One British official sardonically suggested that the CRB was “a piratical state organized for benevolence.” It was not alone in its efforts to arrest suffering.

The Rockefeller Foundation (RF) and the American Red Cross, among dozens of other organizations throughout the United States, delivered life-giving aid in the form of food, clothing, and medicine to millions of Europeans—noncombatants and combatants alike—in practically every war-torn region of the continent. This work was initiated within days of the outbreak of war. Perhaps because American relief efforts successfully mitigated so many near-starvation crises and epidemics, they have received almost no coverage in the historical literature. Detailed records kept by the leading organizations and by their officials, however, permit scholarly investigation. This report is based upon research in materials that are housed at the Hoover Institution Library and Archive in Stanford, California; the Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa; the archives of the American Red Cross in Lorton, Virginia and College Park, Maryland; and the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in Sleepy Hollow, New York. It focuses, however, mostly on the materials located at the RAC and the preliminary findings of research conducted there in August 2007. It is especially concerned with the war’s outbreak and the response of Americans to the humanitarian crises afflicting Europe.

Preliminary Findings

What little is generally remembered about relief in World War I invariably credits Herbert Hoover with the initiation of aid programs for Europe. The Rockefeller Foundation, however, actually mobilized for the purpose of instituting a relief program prior to the formation of Hoover's Commission for Relief in Belgium. After having resolved on 21 October 1914—one day prior to the founding of the CRB—"that it was urgently desirable that the [Rockefeller Foundation] should avail itself of such opportunities as might be presented for the relief of non-combatant sufferers from the war in Europe, and especially the inhabitants of Belgium," the foundation's trustees established a system for the delivery of aid.¹ Through its close institutional ties with the Foreign Sales Department of the Standard Oil Company the RF was able to quickly purchase and deliver several shiploads of food to the hungry Belgians before year's end—this immediate response preceded that of the purpose-formed CRB, which took longer to establish its financial and transportation arrangements. Moreover, the RF distributed aid more widely than did the CRB. The foundation assisted Belgian refugees in Holland and Britain as well as those civilians who remained under German control in Belgium and northern France; civilians under occupied rule were the singular focus of CRB aid.

Whereas both organizations—the CRB and RF—deserved credit for their generosity and capacity to efficiently implement programs of an unprecedented nature, it is worth stressing that myriad questions of policy and diplomacy were raised by their foray into large-scale international relief. Belligerent and neutral governments were confronted by a host of new non-governmental organizations lobbying on behalf of various European constituencies requiring assistance. Government officials were justifiably uncertain at war's beginning as to which organizations they should authorize to perform relief work and to even financially support.

¹ Rockefeller Foundation, *Annual Report, 1913-14* (New York: Rockefeller Foundation, 1915), 24.

Furthermore, it was by no means predetermined that the CRB, RF, and American Red Cross would become the major leaders of relief programs because their own officials were divided over such issues as the merits of performing emergency relief versus longer-term reconstruction operations and whether to aid civilians or soldiers exclusively. Complicating their decision-making processes, these three organizations had to jockey for position with at least sixty other relief-type organizations that all claimed the authority and capacity to raise monies and often to actually deliver aid inside the war zone. At war's beginning, therefore, the trajectory of American aid was uncertain at best as aid groups negotiated their positions.

Not only did organizations vie for the lead role in distributing aid within occupied Belgium but they also fought to consolidate control over the arrangements by which donations were solicited within the United States. That autumn the RF allied with the Belgian Relief Committee (BRC) of New York because this body of prominent bankers, politicians, and socialites seemed to hold the greatest promise for successful domestic fundraising. Robert de Forest of the BRC was greatly distressed, however, by the many groups working at cross-purposes. He informed foundation official Starr Murphy in mid-November 1914 that “clearly . . . there is to be competition in relieving Belgium.”² The two men correctly viewed competition in this field as less than desirable and certainly inefficient. Meanwhile, in London, Herbert Hoover held the same view but was intently focused on securing agreements with the belligerents before turning his attention to raising monies. When he did so in late 1914 he discovered to his dismay that two organizations, the BRC and the Committee of Mercy, had already forged relationships with the RF and the U.S. Department of State. Robert Lansing, the department's counselor and future secretary, encouraged Americans to send monies either directly to the BRC or to the Committee of Mercy. But Hoover soon outmaneuvered both

² De Forest to Murphy, 18 Nov. 1914. Folder 657. See also Thomas F. Ryan to Hoover, 2 Nov. 1914. Folder 658. RF Box 67, RG 1.1, 100N.

groups and obtained the clear endorsement of the Rockefeller Foundation and the State Department.³ Thereafter the CRB controlled a monopoly of the domestic fundraising activities in the United States for the purposes of Belgian relief and the distribution of aid within Belgium. Despite a series of miscommunications and misunderstandings that created some ill feelings among their officials, the CRB and RF would establish an effective working relationship for the remainder of the war and during its aftermath.

The RF was initially concerned that publicity given its substantial donations might deter giving by other American organizations and individuals who viewed the foundation's deep pockets as sufficient to meet the needs of the beleaguered. It was greatly satisfied that reports of its involvement actually stimulated donations.⁴ One of the likely reasons why the RF announcement accomplished this result was that RF involvement gave people a specific conveyance for donations. Americans now knew of a definitive route by which aid would in fact go to Belgium. Likewise, those in the service-provider industry such as operators of tug boats and warehouse facilities eagerly offered in-kind donations to decrease the cost of the foundation's shipment of food to Europe.⁵ The CRB had also been concerned that Americans might be immobilized by the humanitarian catastrophe, and was careful about balancing its publicity statements to suggest that the need was great but also that a solution could be found in the CRB. Collectively these concerns shared by the RF and CRB reveal their sensitivity to public opinion and their attempts to influence Americans to support their activities.

Nobody knew when the war would end and practically all statesmen, generals, and relief officials believed at first that it would conclude quickly. This perspective influenced RF policy

³ See for example, Warwick Green to Jerome D. Green, 16 May 1916. Folder 653. RF Box 66, RG 1.1, 100N.

⁴ Murphy to John D. Rockefeller. 12 Nov. 1914. Folder 665. RF Box 67, RG 1.1, 100N; and A. Barton Hepburn to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 5 Nov. 1914. Folder 653. RF Box 66, RG 1.1, 100N.

⁵ It appears that a portion of the Rockefeller donations, including some contributions by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial fund to Near East Relief, were given anonymously.

at the outset because the foundation was concerned that if it invested too heavily in short-term food aid that it would lack the financial resources to invest more systematically in postwar reconstruction. Contributing to this belief about the war's impending termination was the difficulty (and sometimes impossibility) of obtaining accurate information about the war and its effects on the people of Europe. Modern readers may find it difficult to relate to the relative immaturity of communications systems that hampered relief work. Not only were the belligerent governments' policy decisions inconsistently disseminated and often the source of rumor until confirmed at much later dates, but even more problematic was the development of appropriate programs to remedy critical food shortages and combat the spread of disease. In late October 1914, for example, Jerome D. Greene, secretary of the RF, informed Walter Hines Page, the American Ambassador to Britain, "None of us has an opinion as to the scale on which our aid should be given."⁶ This reflected the challenges of assessing a dynamic wartime environment. The rationale behind the foundation's establishment of a War Relief Commission and the deployment of its members to Europe derived in large part because of the RF's need for sufficiently accurate information to make sound decisions about its relief expenditures.

Relief became a task of epic proportions. The ever-changing nature and the expanding geographic extent of the humanitarian cataclysm proved extraordinarily challenging for the "relievers" charged with assisting the beleaguered. Contingents of Red Cross personnel could be found laboring in major cities, remote villages, and near the frontlines. A wartime headquarters for the Rockefeller Foundation was established in Bern and its War Relief Commission (WRC) officials routinely crisscrossed the warring nations to investigate conditions and verify the effectiveness of the numerous programs funded by the foundation. Their reports contained exceptionally detailed surveys of political, economic, and social conditions in the regions

⁶ Green to Page, 24 Oct. 1914. Folder 657. RF Box 67, RG 1.1, 100N.

studied. The WRC first encouraged RF monies to be spent on noncombatant aid, but found the distinction meaningless in places like Serbia where civilians could not be isolated from soldiers, and effective disease abatement necessitated treating the entire population.⁷ American CRB personnel were dispersed throughout occupied Belgium and France with headquarters in Brussels, Rotterdam, and London. The United States' declaration of war in April 1917 shattered the patina of neutrality maintained by the CRB, but the belligerents sanctioned continued American control once the neutral Dutch and Spanish assumed the titular headship of the organization and replaced the Americans behind German lines. Rockefeller personnel were also withdrawn from war zones, whereas the Red Cross continued its operations. These were but some of the many American humanitarians engaged directly in overseas relief for the duration of the war and long thereafter. They were supported by a veritable army of sympathetic compatriots in the United States and many other countries.

Total war, especially its disruptive effects on food supplies and public health, had engulfed the entire population of Europe. Relief agencies were continually forced to adjust their policies and practices to acknowledge that the lines between soldier and civilian were utterly blurred. Maintaining these distinctions remained important in certain circumstances, however, to conform to agreements made with the belligerents and to uphold the expectations of donors. In the case of occupied Belgium and France it was imperative that the CRB maintained strict control of its shipments and that no one except for the intended civilian recipients received these supplies. Those detailed statistics facilitated the numerical tabulation of the humanitarian effort, but no clearinghouse amassed precise numbers for all the organizations involved. The successful relief of Belgium and France inspired repeated initiatives for the relief of other countries and regions including a Rockefeller Foundation effort to form a Commission for Relief in Poland

⁷ Rockefeller Foundation, *Annual Report, 1915* (New York: Rockefeller Foundation, 1916), 293.

(CRP). A variety of factors prevented the CRP from beginning any systematic relief program but that did not mean that moral or military arguments were not persuasively marshalled in its behalf. Each relief initiative involved decisions of the highest political and strategic order. They were always conditional and ever-dependent upon the uneasy agreement of two warring coalitions.⁸ One success did not necessarily beget another.

Tentative Conclusions

No less than tens of millions of Europeans received food and other forms of life-giving assistance through a broad-based, multi-billion dollar aid regime. These initiatives varied markedly in intensity, duration, and location. The wider ramifications of arresting malnutrition in millions of children and eradicating often-debilitating and highly lethal diseases infecting millions of formerly able-bodied adults are extremely difficult to quantify. It certainly appears that the extensive and prolonged engagement of American non-governmental and governmental relief agencies saved millions of European lives. Americans rallied to aid Belgians and other afflicted Europeans long before their nation went to war and continued helping others in need long after the conflict ended. Relief constituted America's greatest contribution to the resolution of the war and the mitigation of its worst attributes. Through continued exploration of the Rockefeller Foundation's historical files, particularly its microfilmed Source Books and War Relief Commission records, this study will attempt to reveal how the foundation became one of the most important organizations in the relief of Europe and the multifaceted contours of that involvement.

⁸ Rockefeller Foundation, *Annual Report, 1916* (New York: Rockefeller Foundation, 1917), 318-23.