

U.S. Food Aid and the Expectation of Gratitude, 1914-1950

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Background

Between 1914 and the 1950s, U.S. food nourished many European civilians during war and its aftermath. Upon the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, millions of Americans in a neutral nation mobilized to relieve the suffering of civilians in Europe through substantial contributions of money, food, and clothing, thus beginning a long relationship between Americans and Europeans. Non-profit organizations and U.S. government loans fed much of the population of Belgium and Northern France in 1914, using tens of thousands of volunteers and hundreds of millions of dollars under the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB), until the U.S. entry into the war in 1917.

Food, a vital weapon in the Allied blockade strategy of starving the enemy during the conflict, became the hope for peace, social stability, and U.S. goodwill in 1919, as former foes became the objects of food relief efforts. European men, women and children found themselves part of a series of major humanitarian projects under the auspices of the American Relief Administration (ARA), which provided famine relief in many nations, including Germany, Austria, Poland, and Russia in the years after the war. The food aid program lasted into the 1920s and re-emerged in the Second World War era as Americans again shipped food to Europe. Both through government-funded programs and private initiatives, Americans shared their bounty.

These food aid efforts targeted war victims, even former enemies, with the twin goals of using American surplus goods and staving off social revolution in societies devastated by war.

While never fully articulated in charitable publications and propaganda, the message for Americans participating in food aid programs was clear—U.S. food would make the world safer, and would cement a relationship between American benefactors and the grateful recipients of aid. American leaders called for assistance for war victims with the understanding and expectation that Europeans would not only understand and welcome the aid, but would also show appropriate gratitude. Europeans did indeed thank their American benefactors with letters, pieces of art, homemade crafts, and personal visits, all of which helped establish sustained encounters between those giving aid and those receiving it. Many Americans who had provided the resources and labor for the projects received hand-produced tangible expressions of thanks from individuals within Europe, which helped validate U.S. governmental claims in both wars that it was intervening in world affairs to safeguard freedom and democracy. Many of the Europeans were often genuinely grateful for the assistance, but few imagined the price this gratitude might have in the long-term expectations of U.S. policymakers and the American general public.

My project analyzes how these relationships shaped both European and American perceptions of their relationship with each other. I argue that in the wake of American generosity after these two global upheavals, European expressions of gratitude for U.S. aid helped forge an expectation of continued indebtedness and approbation among many Americans that has shaped foreign policy and popular understandings of the U.S. position in the world to the present day. While conceived of as discrete efforts during wartime, by the 1950s, many of these humanitarian food relief agencies transformed into permanent aid organizations, with strong ties to U.S.

personnel and funds, including USAID, CARE, and UNICEF, all of which have had a global impact in the last half-century.

Outline of the Project

Resources at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), and other important U.S. archival collections, suggest the necessity of a three-pronged investigation of notions of gratitude and war relief in the period during and after World War I. In order to drum up support among ordinary people for philanthropic drives, leaders of these movements had to create an imaginative connection between the “victims” of the European war and the “benefactors” in the United States. This required a massive propaganda effort, so the first aspect of this project centers on questions of *Advertising and Recruitment*. Officials involved in war and postwar relief first identified a perceived humanitarian crisis in Europe, and then used this crisis to advertise to a target population in the United States. Many of these propaganda campaigns used highly gendered language to contrast the innocent women and children of Europe with militaristic soldiery. Children were especially important to the fundraising efforts, because they were seen as both innocent in the war and in need of help to ensure their futures.

Propaganda exposing the plight of children was an easy sell, as many Americans felt that this helpless population should not pay for the crimes of adults. As General Henry T. Allen once wrote to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., in regard to relief for children of former American enemies: “America never waged war on children, and this crisis among the children of our late enemies is an opportunity for us to make a striking endeavor in the interest of humanity, civilization and peace.”¹ Publicity campaigns used pamphlets, speeches, photographs, news stories, and creative events to show Americans how to help. In one particularly successful fundraising scheme, major benefactors such as General John J. Pershing and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. attended “invisible

guest” dinners, where empty chairs signified 350,000 starving children and diners ate the “menu typical of that which America is daily giving these undernourished children.”² Such dinners, which were held across the country, received much publicity and helped Americans visualize the needy children even more clearly. Making the case for feeding those children’s parents was a much harder task.

Recruitment of people to provide goods, money and time required a concerted propaganda campaign and resources for disseminating the call for volunteers. Women were particularly drawn into this aspect of the relief work, and their efforts made the organizations successful. Personal letters, news clippings, speech transcripts, and propaganda materials demonstrate a major effort of time and money to get the word to Americans from all social classes. Special efforts targeted recent immigrants, and many of the postwar food projects depended in part on individuals in the United States who wanted to support their family members still living in Europe. The ARA Food Draft program, a precursor of the post-World War II CARE package, allowed for this possibility by setting up a system of warehouses stocked with food in European hub cities. Individuals, corporations or organizations could buy drafts in the U.S. in the name of a recipient in Europe, facilitating a quicker and more reliable direct relief. The Rockefeller Foundation (RF), for instance, participated through an appropriation to an organization that used food drafts to aid physicians and scientists who were destitute in Vienna.³

Once propaganda efforts had taken hold in U.S. communities, the next stage in building a war relief effort was the organization of *Aid and Logistics*. Organizing and distributing the aid was a massive project in each of the historical periods (1914-1920s, 1920-1930s, and 1941-1950s), so a major research focus for the project was the people and networks that made it happen. Food relief involved volunteer personnel both within and outside of Europe, but U.S.

government agencies also increasingly co-opted relief work, claiming pseudo-governmental organizations as their own. American presidents such as Woodrow Wilson and Harry Truman trumpeted U.S. benevolence and saw food aid as a way to bring peace to Europe on American terms, often giving little credit to the thousands of local European volunteers that facilitated the programs' success.

The RF archives are most rich in their holdings regarding the logistics of U.S. war relief, showing the disorganization and competition at the beginning of the war. World War I was a learning process both for private individuals and foundations, but also for the U.S. government, given its increasing expenditure for food aid. With a clear need and a vital propaganda effort fueling interest, scores of organizations arose to help the starving victims of the European war, but many of them worked at cross purposes, often muddying the field for the larger and better funded organizations. Americans faced a variety of claims for their money and their attention, with societies organized along religious or ethnic lines, groups tied to particular political causes, and even pet projects of prominent individuals in society. In one listing for RF officers interested in postwar Viennese relief, two dozen different societies were recognized for relief work in 1920 Vienna. Many others were too small or specialized to be listed.⁴ In response, clearing houses and information bureaus developed, such as the National Information Bureau in New York, whose main job was to “vet” relief agencies.⁵

Still relatively new in 1914, the RF used the war to hone its policies on war relief through a process of trial and error. In that same year, after initially investing in shipping and food cargoes for relief of Belgium, the RF pulled back in the face of Herbert Hoover's Commission for Relief in Belgium's success in this arena, focusing instead on refugee work among Belgians in Holland. After being initially surprised by the war and its demands for aid, the RF spent much

of 1915 and early 1916 developing a war relief policy to help guide them in their expenditures and their use of personnel in the field.⁶ By late 1916, the RF decided to limit its scope of work to concentrate more on specific needs, namely prisoners of war and tuberculosis, while helping the American Red Cross with funds toward relief of non-combatants.⁷ Despite an even more rigid policy in 1917, after the entry of the United States into the war, the RF retained some flexibility and appropriated small amounts to needy organizations on a case-by-case basis. This development of RF policy is one good example of the ways in which understandings of aid and the logistics of relief evolved over the course of the war for Americans directing these efforts.

After each humanitarian intervention in Europe, the people receiving the aid were encouraged to thank Americans for their generosity and did so with creativity and emotion. *Expressions of Gratitude* ranged from the letters of schoolchildren to embroidered flour sacks, to commissioned artwork, to the naming of European streets and buildings, etc. In most cases, recipients of aid made it clear that they wanted to thank the U.S. for its help. In some cases, a more sustained personal correspondence arose between the victims and their benefactors. Individual members of the Rockefeller family received such tokens of thanks from European leaders and individuals, but the RF also received medals, artwork, and letters. For the Rockefellers, who had received much negative publicity during the Congressional hearings in the early war years, the good publicity generated by the public expressions of gratitude must have been welcome.⁸ One of these artistic appreciations, a decorated flour sack, was framed and hung in the RF offices for all visitors to see during the war, as a tangible symbol of RF and American benevolence.⁹

Tentative Conclusions

Despite its important role in world history, U.S. food relief efforts are understudied within the United States, and indeed, in the broader scholarly community. There are few book-length historical studies of the CRB, the ARA, or other food programs from 1914-1920s, and even fewer larger works on World War I mention these ground-breaking humanitarian efforts beyond the official histories written by a few participants.¹⁰ Herbert Hoover himself wrote about his food relief efforts and his biographers have touched on its role in his life, but histories of the RF give almost no space to its role in early war relief.¹¹ The Second World War humanitarian projects have received some attention, but Cold War ideology has permeated many of these studies, focusing most attention on the issue of containment rather than humanitarian aid programs and their World War I precursors. Scholars have spent countless pages debating the logistics of the Berlin Airlift, but little work has focused on the “Quaker feedings” or on the relationships formed between Americans and the European recipients of their aid. Likewise, major organizations such as CRALOG (Council of Relief Agencies Licensed to Operate in Germany) and CARE (Cooperative for American Remittances in Europe) get virtually no mention in studies of this period.¹² Finally, the connections between personnel involved in both World War I and World War II are also a fruitful field for more research, since many American aid and relief workers developed their ideas in the First World War and used these ideas to shape their action in the 1940s and 1950s.¹³

Theoretically, this project relies on social history, gender theory and cultural studies literature for its underpinning. However, while primarily a social and cultural history of food aid and its consequences on the lives of ordinary people in Europe and the United States, practically the questions the book raise necessitate an understanding of political, diplomatic, and

psychological dimensions to the provision of food. A better description of the project might be that of an international studies or peace studies perspective, which crosses national and disciplinary lines to address broad questions facing the world today and in the past.

This research is significant in a number of ways, most importantly as a context for the discussions taking place regarding American foreign policy goals and status as a world power. With the current U.S. president accepting a Nobel Peace Prize, while American armies continue to occupy Iraq and Afghanistan, the historical picture of American generosity provides a frame for the ongoing public understanding of the United States as a benefactor and protector of the world. With frequent cries from ordinary Americans in the past ten years centering on the question, “Why aren’t ‘they’ grateful?” for American help, the narrative I am constructing helps explain the origins and surprising strengths of such views. American food aid in the two world wars forged an image for many both inside and outside the United States of an emerging superpower with a conscience that was willing to feed its enemies. My project seeks to elucidate the broader outlines of this image in order to inform both scholarly and public debate, while also examining the pragmatic political and economic reasons for U.S. food aid in wartime.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ General Henry T. Allen (American Committee for the Relief of German Children) to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 24 March 1924, Folder 370, Rockefeller Family Archives, RG 2, Series Q, Box 42.

² Herbert Hoover to George Vincent, 16 December 1920, Folder 727, Rockefeller Foundation (RF), RG 1:1, Series 100N, Box 77, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. attended the first of these dinners in New York in December 1920, noting that he did so “with pleasure;” John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to Herbert Hoover, 21 December 1920, Folder 361, Rockefeller Family Archives, RG 2, Series Q, Box 41.

³ Correspondence and reports, Folder 728, RF, RG 1:1, Series 100N, Box 77.

⁴ “Report on the Situation in Vienna—Special Report on the Condition of Medical Teachers and Doctors,” by Linsly Williams (Director of the Commission for the Prevention of Tuberculosis in France), 15 April 1920, Folder 728, RF, RG 1:1, Series 100N, Box 77.

⁵ Geddes Smith to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 20 March 1922, Folder 339, Rockefeller Family Archives, RG 2, Series Q, Box 39.

⁶ Jerome Greene to Walter Hines Page, 18 April 1916, Folder 574, RF, RG 1:1, Series 100N, Box 58.

⁷ Special Meeting of the Members of the Rockefeller Foundation, 5 December 1916, Folder 553, RF, RG 1:1, Series 100N, Box 56.

⁸ When RF actions were published in the newspapers, letters of appreciation poured in from around the country, Folder 601, RG 1:1, Series 100N, Box 60.

⁹ Herbert Hoover to Wickliffe Rose, 13 December 1915, Folder 653, RF, RG 1:1, Series 100N, Box 66.

¹⁰ Several recent Ph.D.’s have focused on wartime humanitarian aid, for example Branden Little, in his Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) Research Report, which is available on the RAC website.

¹¹ Raymond B. Fosdick, *The Story of the Rockefeller Foundation*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1989, p. 28. The most well-known biography of Hoover is the multi-volume work by George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover*. New York: Norton, 1983-1996. See also the newer study of Hoover by Kendrick A. Clements, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Imperfect Visionary, 1918-1928*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

¹² There are official organizational histories and one recent scholarly study: Volker Ilgen, *CARE-Paket & Co.: Von der Liebesgabe zum Westpaket*. Darmstadt, Germany: Primus Verlag, 2008.

¹³ Perhaps the best example of such connections is Maurice Pate, who served in the Commission for Relief in Belgium and the American Relief Administration during and after World War I, then he became the first director of the post-World War II program UNICEF.