Herbert Hoover and Belgian Relief

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Herbert Hoover and
Belgian Relief
The Philanthropy of a Swiss American President
by Albert Winkler

Two Presidents of the United States, Dwight Eisenhower and Herbert Hoover, are known to have Swiss ancestry. Eisenhower is noted for his generalship in the Second World War and his presidential administration in a time of prosperity for the nation, while Hoover is often remembered only for his unpopular presidency during the Great Depression. This is unfortunate because Hoover contributed to the well-being and survival of many millions of people during times of grave food shortages. His efforts, which began with the feeding of the nation of Belgium during World War I, prevented starvation in many areas of the world during and after both the First and Second World Wars. Far from being an embarrassment to the nation, Hoover the “Great Humanitarian” remains one of the most remarkable and generous of all Americans. This paper will address Belgian Relief, Hoover’s first effort to feed millions of starving people.¹

Hoover’s Swiss ancestry came through his father’s line. The original family name was Huber, meaning someone who was a tenant or “Hube” on a feudal manor. The name can be traced to Bertoldus Hübere from Bern who was first mentioned in the Medieval sources in 1227. The family had a heraldic coat of arms, a high distinction at that time. The Huber family lived for several centuries in Oberkulm in the Kulm district of what is now the Aargau Canton. The Hubers married mem-

Herbert Hoover ca1918.
Courtesy: Underwood & Underwood.

bers of other Swiss families including the Kreutzers, Neffs, and Hoffmans.2

Gregor Jonas Huber left Oberkulm for the Palatinate of Germany in 1697 or 1699 to take advantage of the economic opportunities of rebuilding the area after it was destroyed by French armies in the War of the League of Augsburg 1688–97. His son, Andreas Huber, was born in Ellerstadt, Germany, and he migrated to Philadelphia in 1738 at age fifteen. Around 1762, the family anglicized their last name and then wrote it as Hoover. In 1745 Andreas married Margaret Catherine Pfautz, who also had Swiss ancestry, and they had thirteen children. Their son, John, was born in 1760, and he married Sarah Burket (Burkhart or Burckhardt) from a Swiss family. John and Sarah’s descendant, Jesse Clark Hoover, was born on September 2, 1846. At about age eight, he moved to the Quaker community of West Branch, Iowa.3

Jesse Hoover married Hulda Randall Minthorn in March 1870. They had two boys, Theodore and Herbert, and a girl, Mary. Their second child, Herbert Clark Hoover, often called “Bertie” or “Bert,” was born on August 10, 1874. In his first months, Herbert had a severe cough, which caused him to choke, and he became lifeless. The baby was laid out on the table with a dime placed over each eye in preparation for burial when someone noticed a stirring of life in the small body.


Then Bert’s uncle, John Minthorn, a doctor, used artificial respiration to revive him. Herbert’s grandmother, Mary Wasley Minthorn, commented on what appeared to be a miracle, “God has a great work for that boy to do; that is why he was brought back to life.”

Most of Hoover’s childhood years in West Branch were pleasant, and he was allowed to play and explore. No doubt he learned many values from his Quaker faith and from his devout mother who was “stern” but “kindly.” Herbert’s memories of his father were “dim indeed” because Jesse died of a heart ailment in December 1880 when his second son was only six years old. Bert remembered more about his mother who was a “sweet-faced woman who for two years kept the little family of four together. . . . [and] She took in sewing to add to the family resources.”

Hulda Hoover was quite accomplished and was something of a free spirit. She had been educated as a school teacher, and she was much in “demand as a speaker at Quaker meetings.” At that time, women rarely spoke at the meetings, and she also surprised the community by singing at these gatherings. Bert’s mother supported women’s suffrage, was politically active in the “vigorous prohibition campaigns,” and was a member of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. Herbert well remembered being “parked for the day at the polls, where the women were massed in an effort to make the men vote themselves dry.” The influence Hulda had on her young son was short-lived because she died of typhoid fever and pneumonia on February 24, 1884 when Herbert was nine.

Two Presidents of the United States were orphaned as children. The first was Andrew Jackson, whose father, Andrew, died before he was born and whose mother, Elizabeth, died when her son was fourteen. Jackson and Hoover make an interesting contrast because they

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6Ibid., pp. 5-6.
7Ibid. and Nash, Engineer, pp. 8-11.
8The most comprehensive biography of Jackson remains, Robert V. Remini’s 3-volume study Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767-1821; Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom 1821-1832; and Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democracy, 1833-1845 (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1977-1984).
developed very different personalities, and they pursued markedly differ- 
ent courses of action. Jackson was known for his shrewd politics, 
vicious military campaigns, and his brutal treatment of American In-
dians, while Hoover shied away from the military, respected the Na-
tive Peoples and their cultures, and alleviated much human suffering. 
In fact, Hoover spent months with the Osage Nation as a child,9 and he had a deep appreciation for Indians his entire life even choosing Charles 
Curtis, a man with significant Indian heritage, to be his vice president in 
1928.

Herbert’s kindly relatives met after his mother’s death to decide who would have the joy of adding the children to their own households. 
The three siblings went to different homes. Herbert’s maternal uncle, 
Henry John Minthorn, was a country doctor in Oregon, and he and his wife, Laura, mourned the death of their only son. In 1885 Herbert went to them to fill an emotional need in their lives. Herbert did his assigned chores, and he worked as an office boy where he learned to type. He also honed his skill in math by attending night school. When he heard that a new university was being founded in California by Leland Stan-
ford, the railroad magnate, Hoover took the entrance examination and was admitted in 1891.

Herbert worked his way through Stanford, and he graduated in geology with the first graduating class in 1895. In his final year of study, Bert met Lou Henry in a geology lab class. Like Hoover, Lou was also born in Iowa in 1874, but she came to California with her family ten years later. Lou was attracted to the outdoors, and she retained a spirit of adventure her entire life. She majored in geology at Stanford and reportedly was the first woman in the United States to graduate with that major.10 Herbert thought it was his “duty to aid the young lady in her studies both in the laboratory and in the field.” He was immediately attracted to her “whimsical mind, her blue eyes, and broad grinnish smile.” Hoover soon took Lou to dances and other social gatherings on campus. By the time Hoover graduated, he and Lou had created a special relationship, and they agreed to write to

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9 Hoover, Memoirs, pp. 4-5.
10 Important studies include, Anne Beiser Allen, An Independent Woman: the Life of Lou Henry Hoover (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2000) and Timothy Walch, ed. Un-
Herbert Hoover and Belgian Relief

For the next three years, they only saw each other once as Lou finished her education, and Herbert tried to make enough money to support a family.\textsuperscript{11}

Hoover’s mining career started very modestly when he “finally got a job pushing a car in the lower levels of the Reward mine [in California] for $2 a day, on a ten-hour night shift and a seven-day week.” However, Herbert’s typing skills helped him to land other positions, and he soon boasted that he never again had to apply for any kind of engineering jobs because “they have come of their own accord.” Hoover benefitted from the fact that American mining engineers were in high demand because of their superior training, and he soon got a job in Australia where he worked from 1897 to 1899.\textsuperscript{12}

When Hoover was offered another position in China at a substantial salary of twenty thousand dollars a year, he sent a telegram to Lou Henry asking her to marry him and accompany him to Asia. She readily accepted, and the couple was married on February 10, 1899 in the bride’s family home in Monterey, California. That afternoon they boarded a ship for Honolulu, Japan, and Shanghai where they arrived in March.\textsuperscript{13}

Herbert’s work as a mining engineer in China was interrupted by the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. Calling themselves the \textit{I Ho Tuan} or the mailed fist, the Boxers attacked the foreigners in China and the Chinese who accommodated outside influences.\textsuperscript{14} The Hoovers lived in the compound for foreigners in Tientsin where the city was under siege for a month starting in June 1900, and an average of two thousand artillery shells hit the town every day. They also demonstrated their resourcefulness and courage. Lou volunteered as a nurse, and “she became expert in riding her bicycle close to the walls of buildings to avoid stray bullets and shells although one day she had a tire punctured by a bullet.” She also carried a .38 revolver, which she never fired. On one occasion,


\textsuperscript{12} Hoover, \textit{Memoirs}, pp. 25-34.

\textsuperscript{13} Allen, \textit{An Independent Woman}, pp. 20-3.

\textsuperscript{14} For recent studies on the Boxer Rebellion see, David Silbey, \textit{The Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China} (N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 2012); Lanxin Xiang, \textit{The Origins of the Boxer War: a Multinational Study} (N.Y.: Routledge, 2003); and Jane E. Elliott, \textit{Some did it for Civilization, Some did it for their Country: a Revisionist View of the Boxer War} (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2002).
Herbert retrieved wounded children from a building hit by a shell, and he intervened to save innocent Chinese workers in the compound from being punished as accomplices of the Boxers.15

Military forces from various countries, including the United States, participated in an attack on Tientsin. Herbert knew the area, and the U.S. Marines brought him as a guide to help them approach the fortifications. As he freely admitted, “I was completely scared, especially when some of the Marines next to me were hit. I was unarmed and I could scarcely make my feet move forward. I asked the officer I was accompanying if I could have a rifle.” When the officer retrieved a weapon from a wounded Marine, “I experienced a curious psychological change for I was no longer scared, although I never fired a shot.” Herbert had learned a lesson about guns, “I can recommend that men carry weapons when they go into battle—it is a great comfort.”16

Lou and Bert left China after Herbert accepted a major salary increase and a partnership in the Bewick, Moreing and Company mining firm in 1901. The Hoovers then went to London, England, where they enjoyed a much less challenging existence. Their two sons, Herbert Jr. (1903) and Allan (1907), were born there. When each of the boys was only a few weeks old, Lou would bring him along in a basket and continue to travel. The Hoovers traveled extensively for Bert’s business from 1901 to 1914. In 1903 alone, Herbert visited eight countries on four continents, and, in 1905, he stayed in seven countries also on four continents. Significantly, he visited the countries where he would later do business for Belgian Relief, including England no fewer than 13 times, France 8 times, Germany 5 times, and Belgium 3 times.17

By the summer of 1914, Hoover was very wealthy with assets worth more than a million dollars, but he was not content with his accomplishments. He was nearing his fortieth birthday, and he wanted to return to the United States to make sure his sons had an American upbringing. Hoover was also considering some kind of public service in the nation of his birth, perhaps in an elective office, when events in Europe overtook him and set his life in a different direction.

The First World War broke out when Austria-Hungary declared war in Serbia on July 28, 1914, and like the collapse of a house of cards,

15 Hoover, Memoirs, pp. 50-1.
16 Ibid., p. 53.
17 Ibid., pp. 73-7, 99
various nations felt their interests and security were threatened and mobilized for war. Germany struck first in Western Europe by invading neutral Belgium on August 4 in an attempt to outflank the French Army. Britain, claiming that it was going to war to help the Belgians, declared war on the same day.\textsuperscript{18}

Fearing war, approximately 125,000 American tourists in Europe were desperately trying to flee from the continent, and by Monday, August 3, more than six thousand had already reached London. Tens of thousands soon followed. In the war crisis, the British government extended the summer banking holiday, and thousands of Americans were unable to use their money or cash their checks or letters of credit. Many could not find lodging, and they were often unable to buy food. A mob of roughly a thousand Americans came to the US Consulate in London demanding that their government do something to help them.\textsuperscript{19}

Hoover was good friends with the American consul, Robert P. Skinner, and the offices of his mining corporation were only a block away. Herbert brought several hundred British Pounds from his office to the Consulate and also told Lou to bring additional cash from home. Hoover then started handing out money to the American tourists. The travelers with US Dollars got some of them exchanged for Pounds, and the Americans with no money simply signed informal promissory notes (IOUs) to pay back the funds sometime. No collateral was required, and the loans were interest free. In the days and weeks to come, Hoover set up an organization of hundreds of volunteers to help the stranded tourists. At that point, Herbert’s mining career was over, and he embarked on his career in public service.\textsuperscript{20}

Hoover’s accomplishments in London in 1914 were stunning. He found the funds that allowed him to advance credit, exchange currency, and give loans to the tourists. Additionally, he found lodging and arranged passage back to the United States for many of them. Lou also participated by arranging excursions for unaccompanied women and children to see the sights of London and to visit other towns and areas.


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., pp. 3-11 and Hoover \textit{Memoirs}, pp. 141-5, 148.
of interest. Thousands of Americans left for home, yet thousands more kept coming, but Herbert's organization managed the situation very well. Hoover's personal contribution to the humanitarian fund was the greatest of any private donor. In all, more than $1.5 million was loaned to the tourists, and less than three hundred dollars were lost because of a lack of payment, a fact that speaks highly of the honesty and integrity of the Americans.  

In the two months from August to October, Hoover worked without pay continuously day and night to help the tourists while ignoring his business concerns. By October 1914, the situation was much improved because approximately one hundred thousand travelers had taken ships to the United States. On October 3, Lou Hoover and her two sons, Herbert Jr and Allan, got passage to America on the *Lusitania*, the famous luxury liner which was sunk the following May in the most notorious submarine attack of the war. Bert stayed in London to get his affairs in order before he planned to join Lou and the boys in Palo Alto, California, but other considerations soon intervened because the Belgians were already on the verge of starvation.

The Germans overwhelmed the Belgian Army in the first weeks of the war, and only a small section of country along the coast remained out of German hands. Belgium was the most industrialized and densely populated country in the world at that time. Consequently, its eight million residents had to bring in over 70% of their food because there was not enough available land to produce more, and the German invasion interrupted the needed imports of food. Many foodstuffs were also requisitioned by the Belgian and German armies, and the war severely interrupted the fall harvest in 1914, further reducing food reserves. Britain also placed a naval blockade on Belgium believing that any resources that went into that occupied country would support the Germans. In addition, two million French citizens were trapped behind German lines in the initial weeks of the war, and their plight was equally desperate. Since most of the young men were in the army, the French under German control were mostly the aged and women and children.  

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In early September the food shortages were already acute in the occupied lands, and prices soared. Most of the people could not afford to buy what little sustenance was available, and the outlook was bleak. Millions of Belgians and Frenchmen faced starvation unless some means were found to feed them. Hoover went to the US Embassy and met with Ambassador Walter Page where Herbert heard appeals from the Belgian foreign minister and other prominent citizens of that country. One banker, Emile Francqui, explained that men with administrative experience had to lead the work. These persons had to be from the neutral United States because only that nation had the food, wealth, and expertise to administer the work. Their efforts would be essential in saving the lives of millions. Francqui then described the plight of the poor behind German lines, and he appealed directly to Hoover to take the lead in the relief effort. This was unprecedented because no relief effort to that date was so extensive, and he had been asked to feed an entire nation.

Hoover was already engaged in organizing efforts to help the citizens of those nations before he heard the appeal from Francqui and others. At some point during the negotiations, which covered several days, Hoover had to decide on the extent of his commitment. He later wrote that he mulled over the proposition to help the Belgians overnight. But Will Irwin, a journalist, was staying with Hoover at that time, and he wrote that the decision took longer. Hoover had to choose between the potential of making a fortune from the precious metals needed by the belligerent powers to fight the war and becoming one of “the richest men in the world,” or helping millions of people. For three nights the journalist heard Hoover pacing the floor upstairs obviously trying to “balance his own personal perplexities.” On the fourth morning, Hoover came downstairs to breakfast, stirred his coffee, and stated, “Well, let the fortune go to hell.” As Irwin observed, “In that phrase was born the Commission for Relief in Belgium.”

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The commission, which formally began on October 19, 1914, was often called Belgian Relief, the CRB, or the Hoover Commission. Herbert went back to the embassy to talk with Francqui and Page and made an impressive gesture. "I stated that if I did undertake it [Belgian Relief] I must do so without remuneration, since I could not appeal to others to sacrifice without sacrifice myself." He further stated that he had to have "absolute command," observing that such a job could not be conducted like a "knitting bee" with many people participating in the management of the organization. When the men agreed, Hoover soon called his broker and ordered him to purchase ten million bushels of wheat futures in Chicago, because he was sure that the price of such commodities would soon go up. Hoover went to work with intelligence and energy to the admiration of many, and a new slang term was coined in his honor. "Hooverizing," meant working with efficiency with the intent of helping others.

Hoover knew that the CRB would handle millions of dollars, and that "some swine" would eventually accuse them of making a profit from their enterprises or of stealing money, so Hoover engaged the services of the "distinguished accounting firm" of Deloitte, Plender, Griffiths & Co. to trace all the money and to countersign checks. The company received no remuneration for this effort. Later, such accusations were made, but the firm traced all of the financial transactions and showed that the funds were handled properly.

Hoover needed a large staff to handle matters in Britain and in Belgium. When an American Rhodes scholar at Oxford University, Per- rin C. Galpin, came into Hoover's office to offer his services, he said he could get all of the other Rhodes scholars to volunteer. Soon hundreds of American graduate students volunteered. These men had to

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learn French and to show no partisanship, particularly in Belgium. They received pay only for out-of-pocket expenditures, and many of them worked with Hoover for years. Herbert had great praise for them, and he stated that no one needed to be “pessimistic concerning American youth and manhood.” Many of these young men expressed equally high accolades for Hoover, whom they affectionately called “the Chief.”

Herbert was little concerned over some administrative issues which included the purchase and shipment of large amounts of goods stating, “any engineer could do that,” as though they were problems that could be solved by logic and mathematics. Other concerns were more challenging. His organization had to locate large food supplies, find funds to pay for them, and make sure they reached the needy in a timely manner. Belgian Relief also had to negotiate with warring nations to allow the resources to pass navies and armies and make sure that the belligerent powers would take none of it.

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32 Hoover, Memoirs, p. 154.
Initially, most of the Cabinet members of the British government were opposed to helping Belgium. They were led by the men in control of the military, Herbert Kitchener, the War Secretary, and Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty. They believed that the needless suffering of millions of innocent people was acceptable if this caused trouble for the Germans and helped the British win the war. Churchill tried to discredit Hoover with official “charges of corruption against me [Hoover] personally as a spy working for the Germans.” After a lengthy investigation, “we were exonerated and eulogized.” Churchill never changed his opinion on aiding peoples held behind German lines, and as Prime Minister of Great Britain during the Second World War, he refused to allow Hoover to renew his efforts of feeding the Belgians in occupied Europe.33

Hoover finally got grudging support to feed Belgium because of the support of Edward Grey and Eustace Percy, under the condition that none of the food would be taken by the Germans, but he also had to get approval from David Lloyd George, then the Chancellor of the Exchequer. At first, Lloyd George stated he was completely opposed to helping Belgium, but Hoover reminded him that Britain had ostensibly gone to war because Belgium was invaded and also to protect small nations and to preserve democracy. “It would be an empty victory, I said, if one of the most democratic of the world’s races should be extinguished in the process.” Lloyd George could not argue with Hoover’s morality and logic, and he stated, “I am convinced. You have my permission” to send aid to the Belgians.34

Belgian Relief also had to get assurances from the German authorities in the transportation and distribution of goods, and Hoover went to Germany for the first time during the war in January 1915. The US government had been negotiating the transportation of food with Germany for months, but Hoover was a valuable asset in the discussions.35 In Berlin he met with the highest authorities in the German government including the Reich Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, Foreign Minister Gottlieb von Jagow, and the Secretary of the Treasury

33 Ibid., pp. 162-3 and p. 168 in a footnote.
Bread and soup line in Belgium.

Courtesy: Withington, *In Occupied Belgium.*
Karl Hilfferich. In a series of impressive accommodations, these men agreed to stop taking food from Belgium and occupied France, to give appropriate directions to the ships of Belgian Relief on avoiding mines, and to assure that submarine commanders would refrain from attacking ships bringing food to Belgium.36

Surprisingly, the United States was one nation that caused Hoover some concern. Lindon W. Bates, one of Hoover’s close friends, was the leader of the CRB in the New York. However, friction arose between the two men after Bates’ son was drowned on the Lusitania in May 1915. Bates irrationally blamed the CRB for the death of his son, and he tried to ameliorate his personal grief by seeking to advance his prestige through “personal publicity.” In an article published in the Saturday Evening Post, Bates indicated that the New York office was actually running Belgian Relief, and he was leading the effort. When Hoover wrote that the article contained “46 absolute untruths and 36 half-truths of a character that is entirely misleading,” Bates sought revenge by accusing his old friend of illegal activities.37

When Hoover was in transit to America in October 1915 to resolve the issues, Bates went to Washington, DC, and complained to the State Department, Justice Department, and to Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. Bates maintained that Hoover was in violation of the Logan act of 1799 which stated that no American citizen may negotiate with foreign powers regarding the relationships of these nations with the United States. Further, Bates alleged, Hoover had violated American neutrality and had acted like an agent of Britain in support of the Allied governments.38

Even though Hoover thought his old friend was deranged by grief, he had to go to the nation’s capital and address the charges. When he met with the Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, the politician asked, “Have you prepared your soul for a thousand years in jail?”39

The head of Belgian Relief refuted the charges against him, and he clarified his case to various government officials, who accepted his explanations. Hoover met with Senator Lodge who praised the CRB as “one of the finest things ever done by a neutral in war,” but Her-

36 Hoover, Memoirs, p. 165 and Hoover, Epic, pp. 87-118.
37 Nash, Humanitarian, pp. 139-40 and Hoover, Epic, pp. 161-2.
38 Nash, Humanitarian, pp. 143-5.
Herbert’s most powerful supporter was Woodrow Wilson. The President of the United States spoke with Hoover on November 2 and praised him highly. He later stated that Hoover was “a great international figure. Such men stir me deeply and make me in love with duty!” Soon after the meeting Wilson gave a statement to the press saying that he was “highly pleased” with the CRB, and it had created much “international good will.” The President had given Belgian Relief much prestige, and Bates’ charges of impropriety were ignored.

Financing the relief project was a major problem, and within months, the funds available from the Belgian banks with international connections and the Belgian government in exile ran out. Initially, Hoover needed twelve million dollars each month for Belgian Relief, but later the costs went up dramatically, until he needed twenty-five million dollars a month.

Hoover negotiated with various countries to get them to donate most of the needed funds. At times, he was met with hostility. When he appealed to the Minister of Foreign Affairs for France, Théophile Delcassé, the minister “violently” denounced the German invasion. He further stated that France would never “condone this gross barbarity” as though feeding two million Frenchmen would somehow legitimize the occupation. Hoover left the office “with a feeling of humiliation.” When he got back in London, an official from a French bank handed him checks for seven million dollars, no doubt from the French government. After that, additional funds arrived punctually every month.

For the entire war, Belgian Relief required over nine hundred million dollars to operate, a huge sum at that time. The government of Britain gave the equivalent of over one hundred million dollars, France donated nearly twice that figure, and the United States granted the largest single amount, nearly four hundred million dollars.

Charity provided the significant sum of over fifty million dollars to the relief effort, and Hoover believed that private donations gave his effort definite advantages. Benevolent organizations “became our effective armor against the periodic attempts of both the British and German militarists to suppress or restrict our activities.”

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40 Nash, Humanitarian, pp. 149-53.
41 Hoover, Memoirs, p. 160 and Hoover, Epic, pp. 55-78.
42 Hoover, Memoirs, p. 169 and Hoover, Epic, pp. 79-86.
43 Hoover, Memoirs, p. 170.
was formally established, Hoover contacted the various states in the US and numerous governments worldwide urging them to create Belgian Relief Committees of their own. At least nine countries did so as well as over forty states in the US.44

The people of the United States gave impressive amounts to the CRB which exceeded thirty-five million dollars. Local relief organizations were established in 80 out of 88 counties in Ohio. Ships to transport goods were hired by various states including Massachusetts, Virginia, Connecticut, Kansas, Oregon, and California. Lou Henry Hoover was instrumental in arranging for the first ship from California. Service organizations including the Daughters of the American Revolution made appeals as did churches along with Catholic children who followed the admonition of His Holiness, Pope Benedict XV. School children and university students made contributions, newspapers organized relief, and even the poor made donations. In one of the most touching episodes of the effort, the young girls from a “charity home” in Cooperstown, New York, sent one dollar a month. These “little girls” made a few pennies for doing their tasks well, like making beds and sweeping floors, and they gave their meager earnings to help the children in Belgium. Professor Vernon Kellogg of Stanford University, who worked with Hoover on Belgian Relief, summed up the importance of the donations. “The giving has been so worth while; worth while to Belgium, saved from starvation of the body; worth while to America, saved from starvation of the soul.”45

Belgian Relief and Hoover had to improvise on many levels. They tried to control consumption by issuing ration cards to make sure the people only got their fair share. The CRB gave out much food for free, but some was sold at modest prices to those who could afford it. These funds were then given to the destitute Belgians.46 Hoover set the cost for food, but a black market soon appeared with greatly inflated prices, and the CRB was forced to confiscate all surplus food from farmers to suppress the illegal trade. The Belgian and French national currencies soon

46 Ibid., p. 78.
disappeared, but some form of exchange was necessary to maintain the much weakened economies. To keep the Germans from seizing moneys and using them to buy goods, the CRB issued different currencies in twelve hundred communities that were only good in the towns and villages where they were issued. Each required the signature of the mayor on the bills to authenticate them.47

The destitute and the unemployed got most of the support, but even the wealthy received food because there was nowhere else to get it.48 In addition to nourishment, the poor needed medical care, rent, clothes, and fuel. Belgian and French volunteers established numerous soup kitchens which were a means of distributing “meat, fat and vegetables” to those in need. Hoover visited hundreds of such cookeries where he was inevitably invited to sample the product, and he always found the soup to be excellent. The daily work of children was often to retrieve soup from the kitchens, and Hoover observed, “The emblem of Belgium during the war should have been a child carrying a soup bucket.”49

The head of Belgian Relief was genuinely moved by the plight of the Belgians. In 1914, Hoover went to Brussels and met with Brand Whitlock, the US Minister to Belgium. The two men went to see the distribution of food from the CRB. As Whitlock explained, the Belgians “came, hundreds and hundreds of them.” When they received their rations of a pot of soup and a loaf of bread, they took time to take a formal bow and say, “Merci!” before they left. The sight “stabbed one to the heart, and brought an ache to the throat, and a most annoying moisture to the eyes.” The scene was so gut wrenching that “it was a sight that I could not long endure.” Whitlock believed that Hoover was also moved. “I knew what was going on in Mr. Hoover’s heart when he turned away and fixed his gaze on something far down the street.”50

Hoover and his associates recognized that the nutritional needs of children were different from adults. Specifically, the youngsters needed more fats in their diets, and the children got an extra meal at lunch time, usually served in a public building or schoolhouse. Soon more that 2.5 million children and expectant mothers were receiving this additional

47 Hoover, Memoirs, pp. 174-5.
48 Kellogg, Fighting Starvation, p. 31.
49 Hoover, Memoirs, pp. 175-6.
meal daily. The CRB went one step farther and devised a specific cracker that included “fats, cocoa, sugar and flour, containing every chemical needed for growing children.” The same children who got the extra meal also received a cracker daily as well as a ration of stew and condensed milk. Hoover noted that the rate of illness and mortality among the children of Belgium and France during the war had never been so low. This means of feeding children was so successful that it was later copied by many organizations both after the First and Second World Wars, including the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), which Hoover helped to organize at the end of World War II.\(^1\)

Robert Withington visited Belgium during the war and saw much gratitude for the work of the CRB. “ Everywhere one went, he was overwhelmed with heartfelt expressions of gratitude from rich and poor, from young and old. The very children in the little villages waved their caps as the car with its C.R.B. pennant went by; in the streets of Hasselt, where everyone seemed to know the Americans, laboring men and peasant women saluted them as they passed. Time and again people said to us, ‘If it had not been for America, we should all be dead.’”\(^2\)

School children stood up to greet the Americans and sang *The Star-Spangled Banner* in their honor. They also sang, “Who is it that gives us food to eat and warm clothes to wear? America! America!” Men and women greeted the Americans with tears of gratitude in their eyes, and the Catholic Cardinal, Désiré-Joseph Mercier, suggested that a tablet be placed on the door of every church, so future generations would always remember Belgian Relief. The sign would read, “Remember the help which America brought in the Terrible Years.”\(^3\)

The CRB also imported over fifty-five million pounds of such materials as clothing, buttons, thread, and needles. The most impressive cottage industries in the occupied lands was the making of hand lace for which the Belgian women were particularly famous. During the war, the lace makers had no market. Not only were these women deprived of a means of support, but the skill of making lace might be lost if the practice of producing it stopped. Belgian Relief paid the women to make hand lace and keep their skills alive. The CRB retained the lace until the

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\(^3\) Ibid., pp. 83-5.
Belgian Relief had its own version of the Ten Commandments which included, "Feed the People Regularly, no matter what the cost in energy, in compromise, in money; no matter the difficulty or the sore discouragement; keep the food coming in; keep it going to the mouths of all." The effort was so efficient that Vernon Kellogg observed, "that no commune of all the 5,000 in the Belgian and French occupied territory missed for a single day its ration of bread, from the time the Americans came in until they went out, is sufficient evidence" of the success of their efforts.

Despite the impressive efforts from Belgian Relief, the amount of food reaching the Belgians and French was still small, and "the food value averaged 1,500 calories per day per person." That amount of food was hardly sufficient for those at rest, and it was inadequate for anyone who was active. Many men who still had jobs and went to work lost at least ten to forty pounds, and they had to be supported by additional food from their families. Some women also fainted in lines from lack of food while waiting for their rations.

In the first two years of the war, the health of the Belgians overall seemed to benefit from the simple but monotonous diet, but the situation got worse during the winter of 1916-17 when bad weather hurt the crop yields of both grain and potatoes in Belgium and Germany. This resulted in the "turnip winter" in Germany where many people subsisted on the hearty vegetable that was usually only eaten by cattle but contained few calories. To make matters worse, the waterways used by Belgian Relief to deliver goods froze over for six weeks starting in February 1917 causing more difficulties in transportation. The situation was very bad in the occupied countries where a marked increase in tuberculosis was noted. In some areas behind the German lines the birthrates fell by nearly fifty percent, while death rates rose by the same amount. Among the elderly, the death rate doubled. The amount of food from the CRB was barely a subsistence, which supports the argument that Belgian Re-

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55 Kellogg, Fighting Starvation, p. 139.
56 Ibid., pp. 166-7.
57 Ibid., pp. 206-7.
lief saved the lives of many hundreds of thousands of people who would have perished without it.

Hoover purchased food wherever he could get it for reasonable prices, including from the United States, Canada, India, and Argentina. Transportation was a big problem, and Belgian Relief needed about sixty cargo vessels consistently in operation to deliver 150,000 tons of goods each month to Rotterdam in the neutral Netherlands, so the materials could then be transported to Belgium and France. These ships were
subject to attack by German submarines and allied aircraft during the war, and Hoover finally got both the British and German governments to agree to allow the ships to carry signs and banners which read, "Belgian Relief Commission," to ward off would-be attackers. Many of the vessels ultimately quit flying any national flag, a most unusual practice. Instead, they often flew a flag with C.R.B on it. The banners were nine feet high and a hundred feet long, and the flags were usually fifty feet high.⁵⁸

The seas were dangerous during the war, and prior to the German announcement of unrestricted submarine warfare on January 31, 1917, Belgian Relief had already lost nineteen ships, sixteen to mines and three to accidental attacks by submarines. The German declaration meant that all vessels in the waters around Britain were subject to attack. Within the first week of unrestricted submarine warfare, the CRB lost two ships, the Euphrates on February 3, 1917 with the loss of the entire crew save one man and the Lars Kruse on February 6 with no loss of life. Belgian Relief was in a state of confusion at that time, and many of its vessels were forced to remain in British ports and sell their food there before it went bad.

In total, the CRB lost fourteen ships during unrestricted submarine warfare. Eight were lost to submarines and the other six were sunk by mines. From February to May, the monthly requirement of 150,000 tons of food was reduced to 25,000 tons, and the Belgians suffered under reduced rations. After the entry of the United States in the war on April 6, 1917, Hoover and the Americans were no longer considered neutrals, so the Dutch and Spanish took over feeding Belgium. They negotiated successfully with the Germans, and the food deliveries were back to normal in June 1917. The Dutch and Spanish continued to feed the Belgians until November 1919. By that time, Belgian Relief had delivered more than five million tons of food.⁵⁹

During the war, Hoover crossed from Britain to Belgium forty times on missions for Belgian Relief, and these journeys presented many problems. The British and German authorities never fully trusted the CRB, and Herbert often waited for four hours in line before he was searched to the "skin" and was allowed to proceed. The trips were un-

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pleasant, and Hoover was “often seasick but that semi-comatose condition has its advantage—it makes one oblivious to danger.” His life was in danger on several occasions during the war.

French and British planes bombed railway depots behind the lines throughout the war, inadvertently blowing up CRB food and supplies to “nothingness.” Hoover witnessed one such air raid staged by the Germans. In the winter of 1916, he was in a hotel overlooking Boulogne harbor when German airplanes attacked it at midnight, and he got out of bed to watch the searchlights, listen to the drone of aircraft, and hear the explosions. “When suddenly the window was smashed in and I received my only wound of the war. It was only a cut on the arm from flying glass.” He stated, “I got no wound stripe,” which was a distinction given to soldiers who had been wounded in the war.

In September 1916 Hoover was on a Dutch boat when he awoke in the morning to face a German with a revolver telling him to keep still. Herbert soon learned that the vessel had been seized by the Germans and taken to Zeebrugge, a village near Bruges, Belgium. A French plane soon attacked the ship by dropping bombs, and one of Hoover’s companions “fell in a heap” after the first explosion, but the man was not seriously wounded. The French aircraft made five passes in all each time dropping another bomb. The first bomb had struck a barge fifty feet away, but no other vessels were hit on the plane’s additional runs.

Vernon Kellogg and Hoover were visiting the Germans in 1916 when some staff colonels asked them if they wanted to see the battle raging at the Somme River. The Americans were startled by the offer, but “being of an inquiring mind,” they accepted. British and French forces began the Battle of the Somme on July 1, 1916, and the struggle lasted until November 18. It was one of the worst slaughters of the entire war.

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60 Ibid., pp. 183-4.
62 Hoover, Memoirs, pp. 184-5.
63 Ibid., pp. 187-8.
They traveled by automobile, with occasional shells falling nearby, to a hill overlooking the battlefield in the distance. At that point the “constant rumble of artillery seemed to pulverize the air.” Looking through a pair of powerful binoculars, Hoover saw the “unending blur of trenches, of volcanic explosions of dust which filled the air.” He added, “Once in a while, like ants, the lines of men seemed to show through the clouds of dust.” The suffering caused by the battle was evident, “On the nearby road unending lines of Germans plodded along the right side to the front, not with drums and bands, but in the silence of sodden resignation. Down the left side came the unending lines of wounded men, the ‘walking cases,’ staggering among cavalcades of ambulances.” Hoover observed, “It was all a horrible, devastating reality, no romance, no glory.” He added, “Stupidity is an essential concomitant of war.”

When the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, Hoover no longer represented a neutral nation, and his formal position as head of Belgian Relief had to end. President Woodrow Wilson, already an admirer of Hoover, recognized his experience and skill and placed him over the newly established U.S. Food Administration, a position Herbert held until the end of the war.

However, Hoover’s career as a humanitarian was still in its early stages, and Belgian Relief was a starting point for many activities to follow. His skill in locating funds, finding food, and getting permission to distribute sustenance would alleviate much suffering and save many millions of lives. He founded the American Relief Administration in 1919 that was instrumental in getting food to the starving millions in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the First World War. Additionally, Hoover fed millions during the great famine in Russia in the years 1921-2. The Hoover Presidential Library has estimated that his efforts saved the lives of 15 to 20 million children in these years. In the largest

65 Hoover, Memoirs, p. 193 and Hoover, Epic, p. 140.
relief effort in history, Hoover was again instrumental in bringing food to hundreds of millions of people at the end of the Second World War. Never has any person alleviated as much suffering or saved as many lives as Herbert Hoover.

No matter how praiseworthy his actions, Hoover disliked any show of adulation or even the expression of gratitude from those he helped, and the Belgians seemed to be disappointed by his avoidance “of their heart-felt expression of gratitude.” He often crossed the border from Holland to Belgium quietly at dusk to avoid any fanfare, but somehow the local people learned of his arrival on one occasion. As Vernon Kellogg observed, “All the next day, and for the remaining few days of his stay there went on a silent greeting and thanking of the Commission’s chief by thousands and thousands of visiting cards and messages that drifted like snowflakes through the door of the Director’s house.”

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68 Hoover, Epic, p. ix. Hoover claimed to have saved the lives of “1,400,000,000 human beings,” clearly an exaggeration.
Hoover received thanks from Belgians of every class and condition, including "engraved cards with warm words of thanks from the nobility and wealthy of Brussels; plainer printed ones from the middle class folk, and bits of writing paper with pen or pencil-scrawled sentences on them of gratitude and blessing from the 'little people.'" Each evening, Vernon's wife, Charlotte Kellogg, brought these notes and set them on the table in front of him. "He would finger them over curiously—and try to smile."*^69

Albert I, King of the Belgians, offered Hoover a medal in 1916 to assure him of the devotion of the Belgian people. Hoover seemed a bit embarrassed by the suggestion. "I explained my democratic feelings about such things, and he fully understood." The head of the CRB stated later, "As to European decorations, I have a complete abhorrence of all such toys. I do not want any distinctions of this kind whatever and have often expressed myself to this end."70 Albert tried again to give Hoover an honor in the summer of 1918 when the King offered him the Grand Cordon of the Order of Leopold. Hoover explained that he could not accept it, probably remembering that the US Constitution does not allow government officials to receive titles from foreign countries. Perhaps to soothe hurt feelings, he explained that he wanted only to be known as a friend to the Belgian people. Albert then created a new honor for him "without ribbon or button or medal, and made Hoover its only member." The King ordained him "Ami de la Nation belge." The full title was "Citizen of the Belgian Nation, and Friend of the Belgian People."71

Hoover later allowed himself to be honored in other ways, and "I did accept degrees from the various Belgian universities and the 'freedom' of many Belgian cities." These honors conveniently freed him from paying hotel bills and also saved him money in local shops.72 The largest outpouring of gratitude came in September 1920 when Hoover left Paris for the United States to pursue his political ambitions, and "I received a deluge of letters and telegrams of appreciation." They came from the heads of state from many countries, the people he worked with,
and from the leaders of many religions, including Pope Benedict XV. But the highest accolades came from the innocent and the weak. "The most touching of all were the volumes which arrived over the years containing literally millions of signatures of children, with their own illustrations." No one has ever done so much for humanity and earned such well-deserved praise.

~ Brigham Young University

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71 Ibid., pp. 481-2.