Reading Sample: This is the first 25 pages of Jeffrey B. Miller's nonfiction book, *WWI Crusaders: A band of Yanks in German-occupied Belgium help save millions from starvation as civilians resist the harsh German rule. August 1914 to May 1917* (Milbrown Press, 2018). Release date: Nov. 11, 2018. Contact: jbmwriter@aol.com

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Left or Right

"No One Slept throughout the Night"

Before the August 1914 start of World War I, the Belgian village of Virton was a thriving administrative and commercial center in Luxembourg Province. A Walloon, or French-speaking, municipality of 3,500 residents, Virton was known for its hilly streets, massive St. Lawrence's Catholic Church, and remnants of medieval walls. Located just south of the better-known Ardennes region and less than five miles north of the French border, Virton was the principal town of the small Belgian region known as Gaume, which boasted a warmer microclimate than those around it. Gently rolling green hills and lush pockets of forest were peaceful dividers between picturesque ancient towns and villages.

When the war came, it did not pass lightly over Virton and the surrounding villages. During the invasion, more than 200 men, women, and children were dragged from their homes and executed in one of the worst massacres of the time. Many houses were partially or completely destroyed. Across Belgium the Germans outlawed all movement outside a person's neighborhood without a properly authorized *Passierschein* (safe conduct pass). A constant barrage of *affiches* commanded Belgians in all matters of life. These placards came from either the local German commander or from Belgium's German governor general, Baron von Bissing. Any disobedience was met with harsh fines and sometimes imprisonment.

Nearly two and a half years of occupation had passed when the stories of the "slave raids" crept into Virton long before the German *affiche* was posted. When the official proclamation appeared on the town's walls in late 1916, people read the notice of their turn in the upcoming deportation of Belgian men more with horrified resignation than surprise. It ordered all men between 18 and 55 from the town and the surrounding villages to appear the next day at Virton's Saint Joseph's College. The men were to be there at 7:00 a.m. with blankets and three days' rations. Nothing was said about what would happen to them or where they would go.

"No one slept throughout the night," wrote Joe Green, an American civilian who witnessed the event. "The women were busy mending and packing clothes

and blankets. The men were settling their affairs. The notaries' offices were crowded with men making their wills. The priests and the burgomasters [mayors] and the leading citizens moved all night from house to house, giving words of encouragement and advice, and promising to look after the wives and children left behind."

Green was 29 years old, with thick dark-brown hair and a heavy moustache that reinforced his intense look. An air of seriousness rarely left him, and his temper could be like a firecracker—quick and explosive. He did not suffer fools lightly. And yet, that evening in Virton as he walked among the people he was sworn to help feed, he had to contain his anger and sense of injustice—he was the provincial chief delegate of the American-led Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) and had sworn on his honor as a gentleman to remain neutral when serving in German-occupied Belgium.

The next day dawned heavy, with low-lying pewter clouds and snow that changed back and forth to rain as it fell quietly. The sense of dread and foreboding was heightened by a reminder of the fighting to the south as the big guns thundered off in the distance toward Verdun.

Those who did not obey the *affiche* were taken from their homes by German soldiers wielding rifles with fixed bayonets. Protests, explanations, and pleadings were lost on the German soldiers, who responded with rough handling and rifle butts to motivate the Belgian men. Women and children stood by helplessly as they watched their husbands, fathers, or brothers forced into the street. They joined others—the ones who had heeded the *affiche*—trudging toward Saint Joseph's College. Most of them were workmen dressed in traditional Belgian corduroy pants, coarse shirts, and peasant caps. If it had been farther north in Flemish territory, many would have had on *sabots* (wooden shoes), but this was Walloon country, so heavy work boots were what most wore.

By 7:00 a.m. the streets around the college were clogged with people. Green was watching and tried to remain calm as "the men, each with his sack on his back, were herded like cattle, village by village. The women and children, kept at a distance, stood in compact masses, wailing, moaning, wringing their hands. Order was kept by the Uhlans, especially brought from France for the purpose."

German *uhlans* were lance-carrying cavalry who had become infamous from stories of their brutality during the invasion. When it came to crowds, these cavalrymen knew how to control restless, desperate people. They would ride up and down, using their horses to cut wide swaths through the throng, clearing a path, breaking up little knots of people, always keeping them moving so a crowd could not gather in one place. Each *uhlan* carried a long lance that had a pennant near the end and a steel, razor-sharp tip. He would carry the pike loosely in hand, not resting in the stirrups, and would brandish it at will above the heads of the women and children.

In Virton, the men who were corralled outside Saint Joseph's College were called in groups by village. As they stepped forward, they were shoved and shouted at by the soldiers and formed into a single line that led through the gate into the courtyard of the college. There the Belgians found a long table and four German officers—the men who would decide their fate.

No time was given for any meaningful review or analysis of the health, employment status, or general fitness of each man. Any objections Green might have made were ignored. "Scarcely any questions were asked. There was no time for questions. The examinations averaged less than ten seconds per man." Each man showed his identity card, which had his name, age, and profession. He then waited for the last officer to make his pronouncement, a one-word command in German: *links*, left, or *rechts*, right.

Left was freedom. Right was forced deportation.

Green watched as "those who passed to the right disappeared, waving a last farewell" as an "agonized shriek went up from some woman in the crowd." And as more men disappeared, the crowd become more agitated. Women kept trying to break through the barricade of soldiers to "say one last word to a husband or a son."

The horrifying scene continued to unfold as the young American bore witness. The women were "pushed back roughly into the crowd, often with kicks and blows. In a short time all the women in the front rows of the crowd were being beaten by the soldiers, both with fists and with the butts of guns. This indescribable scene went on for over half an hour, in plain sight of the groups of [Belgian] men, many of whom were weeping unrestrainedly from rage and helplessness. Finally an officer came out of the court[yard] and put an end to the worst of the brutality."

As the rain and snow continued to fall, the men marked for deportation were herded by German soldiers with fixed bayonets to the train station. Cattle cars were waiting, and the men were shoved in. Each car had a recommended capacity of only eight horses or 40 men, yet the Germans were known to force up to 60 men into one car. The Virton men probably fared no better.

By nightfall the Virton train, packed with its human cargo, was gone. As the train had pulled away from the station, the men had no doubt been singing, like many before them, the Belgian and French national anthems, "La Brabançonne," and "La Marseillaise." Any women and children lining the tracks who had been watching carefully might have seen a few small scraps of paper tossed from the moving cattle cars—hastily scribbled notes from deportees wanting to send one last message to loved ones.

In the end, about a third of the men from Virton were taken and, as Green stated, "almost none under the age of 25 . . . escaped." The nearby village of Ethe was hit the hardest—only 17 "able-bodied men remaining out of a population of 1,500. The women and children will be unable to cultivate the fields next spring. In one family in particular, four little girls are left alone. The mother was shot at the

beginning of the war. The father and elder brother are now carried off to Germany. The Industrial School at Ethe lost 36 out of its 40 remaining students. This in spite of the formal promise of the Germans that none of the students would be taken."

Green was shocked and horrified and would never forget what he saw that day in Virton. He ended his official account: "The deportations go on. The Province of Liège, Greater Brussels, and many other localities have not yet passed through the ordeal. Belgium waits."

He was much more forthright when he wrote his parents about the deportations, dropping any pretense of neutrality: "They are carried out with the last degree of brutality. They are utterly unwarranted by the situation in Belgium and they may simply be regarded as the latest and worst manifestations of that systemized German barbarity which must be crushed."

Ultimately, the slave raids would touch most of Belgium, ensnare more than 120,000 men (counts vary widely), and herald a new, harsher existence for the civilians under German occupation. "These deportations," Green explained to his parents, "have done more to break the spirit of the Belgians than all that has happened in the last two and a half years put together. . . . Now an impenetrable gloom, apparent on every face, is settling down on the country."

As one British newspaper reported, the past demands and difficulties of the German occupation had at least allowed civilians to live peacefully in their own homes. With the start of the deportations, however, "now the fear of exile hangs over every man's head, and every woman and child in the land knows that at any moment German soldiers may knock at the house door, and, at the point of a bayonet, drive husband, father, or brother away without a moment's warning, to be swallowed up in the slave army which goes to Germany for no one knows how long, and to return—if ever—no one knows when."

Brand Whitlock, U.S. minister for the legation in Brussels, wrote in his official report on the deportations: "Appalling stories have been related by Belgians coming to the Legation. . . . Even if a modicum of all that is told is true, there still remains enough to stamp this deed as one of the foulest that history records."

And "left" or "right" became words that defined the brutality of the forced deportations. None who were taken then, however, could have guessed that those two words would foretell even greater terror only 24 years later as they became forever linked with the horrors of World War II's Holocaust.

But back in World War I Belgium, the genesis of the deportations—and how the Belgians and a small group of Americans that included Joe Green reacted to them—were all part of a much larger story that had its roots in the early stages of the war. That larger story was of the American-led Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) and its Belgian counterpart, the Comité National de Secours et

d'Alimentation (CN), which joined forces to try and save nearly 10 million Belgian and northern French civilians from starving to death.

Food relief on such a massive scale had never been attempted before—by governments or private citizens—and was considered impossible during times of war. Would the Allies allow food into occupied Belgium? Would the Germans keep their hands off it? Would the Americans be able to raise the funds and organize the purchase and shipment of the massive amounts of food needed to feed a nation? Could the Belgians organize the food preparation and distribution to millions of residents?

Those questions and many more were all backdropped by additional hurdles—the Allies' military opposition to the relief, a harsh German occupation, the deportation of Belgian workers, Belgian passive resistance to the German rule, and even infighting between the CRB and the CN.

In the end, all those forces and events would cause a tumbling together of extraordinary people into a chain reaction of life-and-death situations far from the trenches and killing fields of World War I.

And hanging in the balance were millions of civilian lives.

By September 1914, Belgians throughout the country had no choice but to join the soup-kitchen lines as the country quickly consumed its dwindling supplies. (Public domain; *In Occupied Belgium*, Robert Withington, The Cornhill Co., 1921.)

SECTION I

BEGINNINGS, 1914

A column of German foot soldiers during the invasion that began August 4, 1914, and launched World War I. (Public domain; *Fighting in Flanders*, E. Alexander Powell, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914.)

King Albert of Belgium was 39 years old and little-known to the world before the start of World War I. Cardinal Mercier wrote, "As the simplest of his soldiers, [King Albert] stands in the trenches." He became known as the symbol of stouthearted, heroic Belgium. (Public domain; *A Journal from Our Legation in Belgium*, Hugh Gibson, Doubleday, Page & Co., 1917.)

The ancient university town of Louvain in ruins after the Germans ransacked it on August 25–30, 1914. (Public domain; multiple sources.)

2

Setting the Stage

Major Events of the War

On August 4, 1914, the armies of German Kaiser Wilhelm II invaded neutral Belgium on the way to their ultimate goal, Paris. The invading force was quickly surprised by the fierce resistance of the small Belgian Army and the sporadic acts of self-guided *franc-tireurs*, or guerrilla fighters. German soldiers' reactions to such opposition were swift and brutal—burning, looting, and mass executions in many towns and villages, including Louvain, Dinant, and Visé. To avoid such devastation, the Belgian capital of Brussels declared itself an open city that would not oppose the Germans as long as they marched in peacefully, which they did on August 20.

Belgium's neutrality—which had been sanctioned by all the major European powers in the 1839 Treaty of London—was a significant factor in the war. Germany's flagrant violation of Belgium's neutrality led to Britain entering the war to officially honor its commitment to that neutrality. Sides were quickly established: the Allies, or Entente Powers (Britain, France, and Russia), against the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire). The United States declared its own neutrality on August 4, with President Woodrow Wilson detailing the American position in an address to congress on August 19. The American government officially wanted nothing to do with what it saw as a strictly European dispute.

In September on the Western Front, the British and French were finally able to halt the German advance—which came within 25 miles (40 km) of Paris—and then push it back slightly. This success, however, came at a heavy price: In the war's first major battles—the First Battle of the Marne and the First Battle of the Aisne—more than 2 million men took part, with nearly 500,000 killed or wounded. The stalling of the German offensive also led to months of the "Race to the Sea," in which each side swung west to outmaneuver the other until both sides had reached the coast of the North Sea.

Meanwhile, the thought-to-be impregnable city of Antwerp, defended by a ring of 54 fortresses, was taken by the use of long-range artillery that simply stood

miles back and blasted the forts to rubble. The city was bombed for three consecutive days before it surrendered on Saturday, October 10.

In a final stand along the Yser River, Belgian King Albert and his remaining troops stood firm to save critical English Channel ports. Knowing he could not hold out forever, the king ordered the opening of sluice gates during high tide at the seaside town of Nieuport. The subsequent flooding created an impassable barrier two miles wide and shoulder deep from the sea to the town of Dixmude. This watery obstacle protected a thin slice of Belgium between the Germans and the French border where the king remained with his men, waiting for the day his country would be liberated. The trenches dug there comprised the most western section of the Western Front and became known as the Yser Front, or the Western Flemish Front. The Belgian Army, along with parts of the French Army, manned the trenches. King Albert established his headquarters just south of the trenches and just north of the French border, near the town of Veurne.

Nearby, but further inland, the little town of Ypres lent its name to one of the most massive battles of the war. The First Battle of Ypres pitted the Germans against the British in a fight that raged from October 20 until the third week of November, with hardly a movement of the line either way. Altogether, the battle took the lives of nearly a quarter of a million men.

By late November/early December, the Race to the Sea and the First Battle of Ypres were over, and both Allied and German soldiers began to dig in, establishing the 400-mile front of trenches from Switzerland to the North Sea that would barely change through four years of war.

During December 1914, many of the men on both sides were sick and tired of the war and spontaneously created mini-truces and cease-fires up and down the line, culminating in the incredible Christmas Truce of 1914. Later stories told of opposing soldiers exchanging greetings, newspapers, food, and drink. Men from both sides sang songs together and reportedly even played soccer matches in the no-man's-land between the trenches.

The world would never again see such fraternization during World War I. And the bloodshed—which up to that time had shocked the world—would be equaled, and then some, in the remaining years of the war.

German-Occupied Belgium

By the end of 1914—with the fall of Antwerp, the establishment of the 400 miles of trenches, and the creation of the water barrier protecting a thin slice of free Belgium—the Germans began to settle into the occupation of Belgium and a small section of northern France that lay within their domain.

Even though the Germans had known their neighbor to the west for thousands of years, they seemed to have little sense of how independent, strong-willed, and resistant the Belgians would be to occupation.

Belgium was no stranger to invading armies. In fact, it was known as the cockpit of Europe, referring to the cockfighting ring where two fierce roosters would battle to exhaustion or death. In the past, Belgium had always been a region without its own country—pieces of which had belonged at times to France, Germany, Holland, Spain, and Austria. Its people were eyewitnesses to many other nations' battles across their land—most notably the Battle of Waterloo, on the outskirts of Brussels, where Napoleon had his final defeat in 1815.

Before the war, Belgian nationalism was thought to be nonexistent because the country had been formalized only in 1830 and because there were stark socioeconomic and linguistic divides between the Walloons, who lived primarily in the south and spoke French, and the Flemings, who lived in the north and spoke Flemish (a Dutch derivative). Few in Europe felt that such a country could possess strong nationalistic feelings.

That assumption was smashed quickly with the German invasion. According to Hugh Gibson, secretary of the U.S. Legation in Brussels and a man who had a front-row seat to the August 1914 invasion, "even the Belgians themselves were surprised at the depth and sincerity of the patriotism that was revealed."

The surprise was on both sides. As Gibson explained, "The Germans, of course, were convinced that no real national sentiment existed and the spirited defense of the Belgians quite upset their calculations. Several German officers have spoken to me complainingly of the behavior of the Belgians as though they had in some way misled and swindled Germany by endeavoring to maintain their neutrality and independence."

Reflective of this little-realized nationalism was a Belgian story told of two "wizened city clerks" living under the German rule in occupied Brussels. As they discussed the war, one asked the other, "When and how will the Germans be beaten?" The other man "shrugged his shoulders and declared solemnly, 'They were beaten when they set foot for the first time in Belgium.'"

Before the war, Belgium, with 7.5 million residents and a landmass slightly smaller than Maryland, was the most industrialized country in Europe and was the most densely populated with 652 people per square mile (the United Kingdom had 374, Germany 310, France 189, and America 31). The country imported more than 75 percent of the food it consumed and more than 78 percent of the cereals necessary for making bread, which was a vital part of every Belgian's diet.

American journalist Arthur Humphries explained, "To the Belgian, bread is not only the staff of life; it is the legs. . . . At home in America, we think of bread as something that goes with the rest of the meal; to the poorer classes of Belgians the rest of the meal goes with bread."

Prior to the start of hostilities, Belgium's high import rate of food was not a problem because of the country's well-developed industrialization. Belgian

industries—from coal to armament plants to lace-making co-ops—exported enough to balance the tremendous amount of food imports the country needed.

That all changed when the Germans invaded. Suddenly the factories and mines were closed and thousands were out of work. Much of the harvest was destroyed, requisitioned, or left rotting in the fields for lack of workers to harvest it. And the Germans never even considered providing food to the conquered Belgians. In fact, the invaders simply took food and material wherever and whenever they wanted, despite the world's shocked reaction to their lack of responsibility. With winter only a few months away, a Belgium food crisis was coming closer every day.

But as one observer noted, "Famine sweeps over a country like a blighting wind—yesterday even its approach was unsuspected; to-day it is everywhere." By September, food in Belgium was expensive and getting harder to find, but it was still in markets, restaurants, and unharvested fields that could be scavenged. Farmers retained at least some of their livestock and worked hard to produce whatever they could, no matter how small the quantity.

On the international stage, full alarm bells regarding a pending food crisis had not yet been sounded by the press (that would only happen in October, when it became a cacophony), but within Belgium, some people and organizations had begun taking action even before the war's first shots were fired. On August 1, the Belgian government had bought the entire wheat supply on the market in Antwerp and stored it for the coming need. Some began stockpiling on a local level as well.

The Genesis of Belgium Food Relief

Overall, the country was better prepared than some for such a food crisis. It boasted numerous wealthy individuals of the upper class and merchant class who traditionally helped out during tough times. The general population was ready to sacrifice and volunteer if called upon, and the country had an extensive network of canals used for mass distribution of goods. But by far the most important element to aid Belgium in this particular situation was the country's commune system of governance.

While there was a federal government in place, much of everyday life and everyday affairs were handled by the more than 2,600 local communes throughout Belgium. Each hamlet, village, and town had a commune that kept track of all residents; acted to represent, protect, and adjudicate when needed; and provided charity for those who could not provide for themselves. In larger cities there were multiple communes to handle different districts. The greater Brussels area alone had 16 communes that dealt with its 700,000 residents.

These communes worked so independently from one another and from the higher levels of government that they continued to function relatively well even

after the Belgian government fled to Le Havre, France, and King Albert stayed with his troops on the Yser River.

Additionally, the German occupation government dealt more with the larger cities and regional levels of government. One American historian noted: "The whole machinery of the Belgian central government had been broken down or swept away by the invader. . . . Only the communal administrations remained fairly intact and possessed the liberty of action to permit them to meet the crisis brought on by the shortage of food and the tremendous increase in destitution. It was a happy circumstance for the Belgian population that the local government was so well organized and so relatively independent in normal times."

Because of this, the communes were the perfect vehicles for massive food distribution—if only an adequate and steady supply could be found.

The first Belgians to feel the effects of the war and therefore require assistance were the August refugees. Those who had left their homes in advance of the German armies or had been forced out by the invaders sought food, clothing, and shelter from anyone who would give it. Many headed to Brussels. One American war correspondent reported, "Waves of refugees, many of them utterly destitute, all of them in a state of abject panic and demoralization, thronged into Brussels as the Germans advanced. Day by day their numbers and their distress increased. Relief measures were imperative unless the fugitives were to starve by the roadside or be driven in desperation to plunder right and left." Tens of thousands had already made it into Holland and France, but many more were still on the move because the fighting in Belgium was still fluid and would not be contained to trench warfare until November.

By late August and early September, however, the food situation was obvious to anyone who could read the signs. According to one later history, "It was practically impossible to purchase more than a pound of flour or sugar at a time, and almost all stocks of tinned goods were sold out, bought by anxious people who besieged the shops in the desire to get hold of a private stock before all was gone. The price of food rose to exorbitant figures."

Communes all over Belgium attempted to deal with the coming food shortages. In Brussels, a group of wealthy individuals came together to form the nongovernmental Comité Central de Secours et d'Alimentation (Central Committee of Assistance and Provisioning) for the purpose of supplying Brussels with food.

The major instigator and its elder statesman was 76-year-old Ernest Solvay, the country's richest man, a distinguished and respected businessman, and a world-renowned philanthropist.

The committee's president and forceful leader was 51-year-old Émile Francqui, a major force in the financial world and director of the Société Générale de Belgique, arguably the most important financial institution in Belgium.

Somewhat surprising, in the organizational meeting of the Comité Central, there were three Americans: two businessmen living in Brussels, Dannie

Heineman and William Hulse, and the secretary of the U.S. Legation to Belgium, Hugh Gibson. According to one historian, they were there because 41-year-old Heineman had "suggested to Francqui and others that it would be of great utility to the proposed [Comité Central] to invite the [neutral] American and Spanish Ministers . . . to act as patrons; in this way the committee would be given a neutral character and protection against requisition of its stocks of supplies might be assured."

Francqui, ever the pragmatist, liked the idea and knew that in this case Belgian self-reliance could not achieve all that was needed. As such, Brussels-based U.S. Minister Brand Whitlock and Spanish Minister Marquis de Villalobar y O'Neill became patrons of the Comité Central. The first official meeting of the Comité Central took place on Saturday, September 5. It was quickly established that four major jobs had to be accomplished before food could arrive in Brussels:

1. The Germans had to agree to allow the food in and to not requisition it.
2. The English had to allow food through the blockade that it was establishing to cut off Germany from world trade.
3. Processes had to be developed for determining how much food was needed to feed Brussels; then the food had to be bought, shipped, and transported into Belgium; and then it had to be distributed to the 16 communes of Greater Brussels.
4. Some entity had to be found to pay for such a giant undertaking.

It was a daunting task, but the stakes were too high not to try. Those in positions of prominence began using their contacts and special avenues of influence to apply pressure to the governor general of Belgium, Field Marshal Baron Wilhelm Leopold Colmar von der Goltz, to formally guarantee that the Germans would not requisition any imported food.

The task was a little easier than some would have imagined. At this stage of the war, the German thought process was straightforward: they would not feed the Belgians; there was little left to take from Belgium; they needed every man at the front; peaceful Belgians did not require many soldiers to control; and Belgians would remain peaceful if they were fed.

This logic dictated that a neutral effort to bring food to the Belgians would serve German interests. On September 17 a letter from von der Goltz to Whitlock served as a hands-off guarantee. He agreed "not to requisition the shipments of wheat and flour destined for the alimentation [the provision of nourishment] of the Belgian civil population." However, he also stated that von der Goltz and his civil government would decide on and supervise distribution. While that stipulation was totally unacceptable to Francqui and the Comité Central, it was felt that that battle could be waged later if all other hurdles of food importation had been overcome.

At the start of the war, Herbert C. Hoover was a 40-year-old mining engineer who was a no-nonsense, ambitious, roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-it-done kind of American. He would go on to organize and build the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB), which would become the largest food and relief drive the world had ever seen. During four years of war, nearly 10 million Belgians and northern French would be saved from starvation by the efforts of the CRB and its Belgian counterpart, the Comité National. (Public domain; Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Archives, West Branch, Iowa.)

Americans Get Involved in Belgium Relief

The Comité Central gave the task of finding and securing food for importation to Millard K. Shaler, an American mining engineer living in Brussels before the war. Armed with travel permits and permissions from the Germans, Shaler reached Holland but found no available food for purchase, so he went on to England. There he was able to buy 2,500 tons of wheat, rice, and beans but could not secure permission to export the food to Belgium.

The reason was clear—he was a private citizen representing a Brussels citizen group that had no formal diplomatic backing. That did not get him far in cutting through the red tape of British rules and regulations. He tried to speak with the Belgian minister in London to obtain official Belgian government support. He never got past the reception desk. Shaler sat stymied in London for the rest of September and into October, telling anyone who would listen that the Belgians needed help right away.

Meanwhile, another mining engineer, Herbert Hoover, who had been living in London before the war, was wrapping up months of volunteer service as the head of a group he had founded to assist the 100,000 to 150,000 American tourists stranded by the war (an accurate count was impossible).

Hoover was a no-nonsense, ambitious, roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-it-done kind of American who was highly skilled at tackling complex problems and organizing

massive operations. He also had little patience for trivial things, such as fashionable clothes, as evidenced by one colleague's dry remark that "his dress never varies—he merely writes to his tailor, 'Send me another suit,' and seldom gives himself the bother of a try-on."

Photos of Hoover at the time show a man with dark hair parted nearly down the middle, a high forehead, a strong jaw, and a downward-turned, set mouth. It could be seen as a fighter's face that had so far successfully avoided many a punch. There was also a feeling of restlessness and impatience within the strong gaze and solid pose, as if the moment the camera was clicked, the man would bound away to tackle important issues.

In August 1914, Hoover and his wife, Lou Henry Hoover, were living in London with their two young sons, Herbert Jr., 11, whose birthday fell on August 4 (the day World War I began), and Allan, 7. Besides managing his worldwide mining operations, Hoover was in London trying to secure European nations' participation in the upcoming Panama-Pacific International Exposition to be held in San Francisco in 1915. He and Lou both realized their mission was stillborn the moment the war started.

Additionally, though, Hoover, who would turn 40 on August 10, was contemplating what he should do in his next stage of life. He was restless and not content to sit back and manage his mining operations. An orphan at an early age, he had been raised as a Quaker and was instilled with a "Quaker conscience" of morality that led to a strong desire to serve humanity, but he was unsure how to do so.

Options included the presidency of Stanford University and the purchase of a California newspaper as two different pathways into public service and politics—two areas that deeply interested the mining engineer. He was a wealthy man, but as one associate later wrote, "He didn't want to become just richer. He wanted sincerely . . . to do public service and help people, but in a wholesale way. I don't think he was terribly sympathetic to the fellow selling lead pencils on the corner, but I think he was very desirous to create a society where that fellow wouldn't be selling lead pencils on the corner."

Within days of the war's start and hearing of stranded American tourists, Hoover had organized the Committee of American Residents (also known as the Relief Committee, or Residents' Committee) to help his fellow countrymen. By late September/early October, he was winding down the work when he was approached by his closest friend and confidant, Edgar Rickard, who was also a mining engineer and editor of a mining magazine.

Rickard suggested Hoover meet Shaler. Hoover did so and was, as a later history stated, "immediately impressed by the seriousness of the Belgian situation." He "promised to help if any means could be devised to send in relief." Hoover took

the next few days to work the project over in his head while also consulting many of his close associates who were still part of the Residents' Committee. They included Rickard, Colonel Millard Hunsiker, Clarence Graff, and John Beaver White, all of whom agreed that something had to be done to help the Belgians avert a major crisis.

While Hoover was determining what he would do, Hugh Gibson arrived in London from Brussels with dispatches from Whitlock and to personally brief the U.S. ambassador to Britain, Walter Page, on the critical food situation in Belgium. Shaler quickly enlisted Gibson's aid to help reach the so far unreachable Belgian minister in London. In short order Shaler, with Gibson's aid, had the official backing of the Belgian government in his request to the British government to allow the food shipment through.

During this time, it became apparent to most of those involved that the coming food crisis would affect not only Brussels but the entire country, and that food relief was not a temporary issue but one that would last as long as the war. While most of the general public felt the war would be over soon, there were enough unknown factors that those working on the Belgian problem began seeing it in a longer time frame than first imagined. Overall, the scope, magnitude, and duration of the project began to grow with every conversation and every day that went by.

Regardless of the relief's ultimate size and how long the war might last, the first hurdle to overcome was the approval from Britain to ship what Shaler had already bought.

It was no small task. Arguments about the shipment were raging at the highest levels of Britain's government. To some British officials, Shaler's request of one ship of food was seen as a worthwhile humanitarian endeavor that seemed to be of limited scope. To other officials, that same shipment was seen as aiding the enemy and setting a dangerous precedent for more shipment requests.

An added element was legitimacy. A few days earlier, the shipping request had been a request from an individual, Shaler, representing the nongovernmental Comité Central. After Gibson's interceding, however, Shaler's request was backed by an official representing the Belgian government—the same government that had stood and fought the Germans and in so doing had given the British and French enough time to marshal their own forces.

But how far would the debt of honor and treaty obligations take this shipment request?

On Monday, October 5, a break came. The British Board of Trade informed the Belgian minister that approval for the shipment had been given. But as historian George Nash explained, "At this point a misunderstanding occurred that was to shape the entire outcome of the relief mission and, indeed, the course of world history." The English made a "procedural suggestion" to the Belgian minister that the food be sent from the American Embassy in London to the U.S.

Legation in Brussels. But the Belgian minister, when conveying British approval, told Ambassador Page that this was a *condition*, not a suggestion, and asked if America would accept this responsibility.

Why was this of such major importance?

As Nash states, "It was an extraordinary, probably unprecedented, request in the history of warfare: that a neutral government, far from the scene of battle, oversee the provision of foodstuffs to the capital of a belligerent country under enemy occupation."

Page had no idea how to reply. He had been moved by the personal accounts from Gibson and Shaler of the pending food crisis, but faced with what he thought was the British demand for direct U.S. patronage, he felt he could not officially act without instructions from Washington. The ambassador immediately wrote a cable to the State Department outlining the situation and asking that he be allowed to participate in such a necessary shipment to Brussels. He also added that if the State Department agreed to this, it should also seek additional guarantees from the German government in Berlin to reinforce the guarantee from Governor General von der Goltz in Brussels.

A long two days later, working faster than its usual snail's pace, the State Department contacted James W. Gerard, the U.S. ambassador in Berlin, and outlined the situation, asking that Gerard request German government approval of the plan and confirm von der Goltz's guarantees.

Meanwhile, Hoover—who was in the thick of things long before he ever officially took on Belgium relief—was in nearly constant discussions with Shaler and others. According to one historian, when he met for the first time with Page on Saturday, October 10, "the idea of the Commission for Relief in Belgium first took tangible form." Page later told others that this was the meeting at which Hoover asked if the ambassador would support him and his associates if they needed diplomatic assistance once they took up relief work for Belgium. The ambassador "approved heartily of the plan and promised to render all possible assistance." He also told Hoover that representatives from other Belgian cities, such as Liège and Charleroi, had come to see him, asking for assistance to cut through British red tape and gain American support. Page told Hoover that from then on he would refer all Belgian delegations to him. Hoover would ultimately meet with representatives of multiple Belgian cities.

During the following days, Hoover had a lot to think about on a personal level. There was his immediate family of Lou and their two young sons. What about his mining interests all over the world? He knew that if he chose to tackle the job of feeding an entire nation ensnared within a war zone—something that had never been attempted before—he would have to turn his back on his businesses, and his family would take second position so he could focus solely on the humanitarian relief. Was such sacrifice worth an effort that had no guarantee of success?

Two days later, on October 12, Hoover met again with Page, and this time he had a more concrete relief plan that dealt with the entire country of Belgium, not just individual cities.

Arguably, that is the moment Hoover was all in, committed to taking on Belgium relief.

A later account dramatically told of how Hoover struggled over what he should do and what would happen to his mining interests if he took on the relief program. That account tells of him coming to his breakfast table one morning—ten days later on October 22—and telling his visiting friend and journalist Will Irwin that he would take on the project and "let the fortune go to hell."

That certainly makes for a dramatic story perfect for publication, and it quite probably did happen as reported, but Hoover's activities in the relief process days prior to making such a proclamation argue that he was already deeply committed to taking on the relief. In fact, his prewar contemplation of entering public service, coupled with his months of thorough and wholehearted tackling of American tourist aid, reflected a man primed for taking on Belgium relief.

When he sat down with Page on October 12 with a nationwide plan for Belgium relief, he was a man already dedicated to the cause. There was still no reply from the State Department to Page's October 6 cablegram, so what Hoover was suggesting was all predicated on the ultimate U.S. acceptance of responsibility for the Shaler shipment. If that happened, other shipments would have to follow immediately if Belgium was to be saved. It was assumed these additional shipments would also fall under the protection and patronage of America and be allowed through the blockade by the British.

To organize these relief efforts, Hoover recommended to Page that a central nongovernmental American committee be formed and authorized (with the patronage of America) to administer the entire program. That program would include everything from handling and spending all funds raised worldwide (which was already starting) to the purchasing, shipping, and distribution of all food in Belgium. Hoover also recommended that the new committee absorb the American committee then in Brussels and that Dannie Heineman be asked to take charge of the work of distributing food in Belgium as vice-chairman of the new committee.

Page immediately approved the plan although his hands continued to be tied by the lack of news from the State Department.

Hoover didn't wait for State Department approval to act. He immediately began a worldwide publicity campaign to bring to light the Belgian people's suffering and potential starvation. Hoover knew that the only way he could get governments to agree to any part of the Belgium food-relief plan was to gain worldwide public sympathy and support for the Belgians. Governments would find it difficult, if not impossible, to go against a relief program that was heartily supported by their citizens.

"The greatest hope," he wrote, "of maintaining the open door for the importation of foodstuffs into Belgium and the retention of native food, was to create the widest possible public opinion on the subject. We believed that if the rights of the civil population in the matter of food could be made a question of public interest second to the war itself, then the strongest bulwark in support of the Commission would have been created."

Hoover's understanding of this concept, and of the way the world's news media worked, would serve him and his cause extremely well from the very beginning.

Finally, on October 17, the German government in Berlin agreed not to impede or requisition any food imported by the neutral Americans into Belgium. That was followed two days later by the State Department's approval of the Shaler food shipment.

The ever-impatient Hoover knew that the key to the whole situation was the German guarantee, so on October 17, before the State Department's approval, he generated a major story that went out over the newswires. It announced "a comprehensive scheme for the organization of an American committee with the purpose of taking over the entire task of furnishing food and other supplies to the civil population of Belgium, so far as American relief measures are concerned, under the official supervision of the American Government." This committee would also "concentrate and systematize" all funds and food donated to Belgium relief, and Page had "consulted" with Hoover, who "would be one of the leading members of the committee, which would also include leading Americans in Brussels." While the release did mention the committee was a "proposal," there was little doubt that creation of the entire committee was a fait accompli.

Hoover was going to save Belgium, and no one was going to stop him.

The CRB and the CN Are Born

Even with a determined Hoover steering the proposed relief, there was one more critical person needed before the Belgium relief program could be fully established—Émile Francqui.

As the concept of Belgium relief began taking shape in London, Dannie Heineman back in Brussels had come to the same conclusion as those in London: Brussels food relief had to become Belgium food relief, or the entire country would ultimately starve. It took him days to convince Francqui, the Comité Central, and the two neutral patrons, Whitlock and Villalobar.

On Thursday, October 15, the committee met and decided to extend its operations to the entire country—even before the members had heard that Shaler's initial food shipment was approved. It was an audacious but critical move if Belgium was to be given any chance at all. The Comité Central immediately petitioned and received von der Goltz's approval to expand the program nationwide. The next

step was to send a delegation of Francqui and Baron Léon Lambert, accompanied by Gibson, to London to secure British and American approval of the program.

And thus, two major forces of nature—Herbert Hoover and Émile Francqui—were about to collide. In a surprising coincidence of life, they had met before at the turn of the century in China when they were on opposite sides of a major court battle. To say they disliked each other was a vast understatement. Now, in a fascinating twist of fate, their ability to work closely together would dictate the survival of a nation.

Reportedly, when Francqui was told before the London meeting that Hoover was the man leading the American relief for Belgium, he had shouted: "What! That man Hoover who was in China? He is a crude, vulgar sort of individual." Those were some of the worst insults a Belgian of prominence could toss at any man. While it's true that the recorder of that scene did not personally witness it, the words sound so Francqui-esque that it's more than likely they accurately reflected the Belgian's reaction, if not his exact words.

As for Hoover's personal reaction when he first saw Francqui again, he left behind no immediate personal recollection of how he really felt. Whitlock, who was not in London to witness their first meeting, wrote that "gossips" reported both men had stood silently for a long moment staring at each other; then, as if breaking a spell, they had shaken hands and gotten down to business. While they would each take strategic opportunities in the coming months and years to disadvantage the other—to the serious detriment of the relief—they never betrayed their public appearance of polite teamwork.

At this first gathering in London, they both were pragmatic enough to realize they could not do the job without each other. Hoover had seen the entire operation as solely American because he had a neutral country's freedom and diplomatic influence to obtain the food and ship it into Belgium. But he also realized he lacked a practical way of distributing the food once it entered the country. Francqui, who believed the entire operation could be run by Belgians, knew he had the foundations of a nationwide distribution network, but he also knew the belligerents would not allow Belgians to have the necessary freedoms to buy and ship the food into Belgium.

On October 22—the day Hoover reportedly stated "let the fortune go to hell"—he and Francqui formally agreed to a cooperative relief program between the American Commission for Relief in Belgium (soon changed to the more-inclusive Commission for Relief in Belgium, CRB) and the Comité Central de Secours et d'Alimentation (soon to be transformed into the nationwide Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation, CN, when Francqui returned to Brussels). As to the overall concept behind the two organizations, both Hoover and Francqui agreed that relief would have two prongs: provide food at a slight profit for those who could pay; and provide outright charity for those who couldn't. The profit from one should pay for the other.

In essence, both men wanted to reestablish commerce in a country where it had died. They wanted to restimulate the food chain so that it could become self-perpetuating while also providing funds for the charity portion of the relief.

Taking the most important commodity—wheat—as an example, this meant that the wheat imported by the CRB for Belgian mills would be paid for by the millers, who would pay Francqui's group. The millers would be paid for the flour by the bakers, who would pay a portion of all sales to Francqui's group. The bakers would be paid for the bread by those who could afford to pay. Francqui's CN would collect the funds from various points of Belgian sales, provide subsidies for certain portions of relief, and ultimately pay, through complicated transfers not yet agreed to, the CRB for the original imported wheat. Prices for everything would be set to provide a small profit, and the whole system would be primed by the operating capital that came from donations and governmental subsidies that Hoover and Francqui hoped to secure.

But how much food was needed per month to feed more than 7 million Belgians? An initial goal was set by Francqui of 80,000 tons per month. It was a significant amount, but as Hoover was quick to say, Belgium normally imported at least three times that amount, more than 250,000 tons a month. The estimated 80,000 tons per month would translate to approximately 10 ounces of food per person per day, or according to Hoover, "considerably less than one-half of a soldier's ration."

The organizational concepts behind the CRB and the CN sounded deceptively simple, more a matter of logistics than anything else: The CRB would buy and transport food to the neutral port of Rotterdam, where the supplies would be transferred onto canal barges and hauled to various central warehouses via Belgium's extensive canal network. Once at these distribution centers, the food would be transferred from CRB supervision to CN responsibility. The CN would prepare and distribute the food through its extensive communal network to more than 7 million Belgians in a ration system that would sell the food to those who could pay and give free sustenance to those who could not pay.

The whole operation hinged on two critical agreements with the belligerents: British approval to allow such imports through its blockade, and German guarantees not to take any imports for themselves.

In theory, the entire relief program as envisioned by Hoover and Francqui was straightforward and clear-cut.

In reality, nothing was further from the truth.

CRB Delegates—A Necessary Prerequisite

Because the English did not trust the Germans to keep their hands off any imported food, they stipulated that an unspecified number of Americans be in Belgium to act as U.S. Minister Whitlock's "delegates" to guarantee the Germans honor their no-requisition commitment and to supervise the food until it was turned over to

the CN for distribution. From this one stipulation was born the CRB delegate, an ultimately fascinating and multifaceted category of volunteer who would become, to most Belgians, the true heart and soul of the American side of relief.

But finding and recruiting American CRB delegates was not an easy task. Where could Hoover find U.S. volunteers ready to drop everything for an extended period of time, work for free, go into the unknown world of German-occupied Belgium, and do a job no one could explain in detail? And with a transatlantic crossing taking a week or two, coupled with recruitment time, it might be months before American men with the right experience could be found and brought over. But Hoover needed people immediately.

There were two pathways from which Hoover found willing recruits.

The first pathway was serendipity. By November, 10 to 15 men had floated into the CRB like driftwood onto a beach and become delegates. Jarvis Bell was in Rotterdam working with Captain John F. Lucey; Edward Curtis was the courier between Rotterdam and Brussels; Frederick W. Meert, who had attended universities in Belgium before the war, took charge of Belgium's Brabant Province; Robinson Smith, author of *The Life of Cervantes*, appeared one day in Brussels and became chief delegate of Hainaut Province; James Dangerfield, who had worked two years in Ghent, became a delegate in Flanders; and E. E. Hunt, a freelance war correspondent, would soon join the group through contacts in Holland.

Others would join them in a similarly random fashion through the next month, with most of them being young, adventuresome, and usually from good universities. They included George S. Jackson (Harvard), Amos D. Johnson Jr. (University of Kansas), T. Harwood Stacy (University of Texas), Carleton B. Gibson (University of Alabama), Floyd S. Bryant (University of Nevada and Oxford), William M. Sullivan (Brown and Oxford), Frank H. Gailor (University of the South and Oxford), and William H. Sperry (no university listed).

These first responders who had come to the CRB through serendipity were businessmen and artists, war correspondents and book authors—bound together and driven by the common desire to aid a nation in trouble. Some had lived in Belgium for years, started families, and loved the country like a second home. Others had helped Hoover with his American tourist relief program in London before volunteering for the CRB. A few were simply in Europe, had heard of the proposed relief program, and volunteered to help.

While each one of them was critical at the time for helping the organization move forward, they represented a haphazard way of recruiting that was not practical or reliable for the huge relief program on the horizon.

The same could be said for the second pathway from which Hoover found recruits; it was nearly as unorthodox—Oxford University. The school term was almost over, and numerous American students (most in the Rhodes scholar program) were about to start six weeks of winter break.

One student, 25-year-old Perrin C. Galpin, had seen articles about the CRB and its need for volunteers to go into German-occupied Belgium. He had written to Hoover and was immediately enlisted by the CRB's executive team in London to recruit more students. Galpin had no difficulty finding willing participants, as their youthful spirit of adventure was aroused by the thought of walking into the unknown to help a starving people trapped in a brutal occupation. As the student organizer, Galpin even decided which students would go—in direct contradiction to later assertions that Hoover had approved every delegate.

By early December, 25 Oxford students had signed up and entered Belgium. These idealistic, enthusiastic, rather naïve young men—one of them was only 19 years old—had to deal with battle-hardened German officers and conservative, buttoned-downed Belgian businessmen as they tried to figure out what they were supposed to do. Their entry into international humanitarian relief work was by no means an easy one.

Before the first group of 10 students left Britain, they met with Hoover. Edgar Rickard wrote to Galpin that "Mr. Hoover gave them a nice little talk," and added, "We think these chaps are going to prove quite adequate for the work." At the meeting, which was documented by journalist and CRB member Ben Allen, Hoover told the young men: "When this war is over, the thing that will stand out will not be the number of dead and wounded, but the record of those efforts which went to save life. Therefore you should in your daily service remember that in this duty you have not only a service to render to these people, but that you have a duty to this Commission, and above all have a duty to your own country."

Their biggest challenge, Hoover believed, was to maintain a total sense of neutrality no matter what they saw, heard, or felt. He told the young men: "You must forget that the greatest war in history is being waged. You have no interest in it other than the feeding of the Belgian people, and you must school yourselves to a realization that you have to us and to your country a sacred obligation of absolute neutrality in every word and deed."

How those student volunteers would react to Belgium—and how Belgium would react to them—was a huge unknown. That was just one of many uncertainties that plagued Hoover, the CRB, Francqui, and the CN as 1914 came to an end. Every day seemed to bring new challenges that threatened to shut down the operation. How would the relief be funded? Would the military men from both sides who opposed the program allow it to survive? Where would the food come from? Who would provide ships? Where to find a steady stream of reliable CRB delegates? Could the American delegates remain neutral in the face of the Germans' harsh rule? Would Belgian civilians fight back against the occupation, and, if so, how? And would Hoover and Francqui truly put aside their animosity?

It was anyone's guess whether or not the relief—and the people of Belgium—would last through the winter, let alone the war.

3

The Students Head into Belgium

Arriving in Rotterdam on Saturday evening, December 5, 1914, the first 10 Oxford students who had agreed to become Commission for Relief in Belgium delegates were a bit stunned by how quickly events had transpired. A few days before, they had been university students (mostly Rhodes scholars), and now they were in neutral Holland preparing to go into German-occupied Belgium to do a job that was anything but clear.

"What we were to do, no one exactly knew," said Emil Hollmann, one of the first 10, who was 24. "We had visions of sitting on the top of box cars or sleeping on the decks of small canal barges in their long journeys from Rotterdam into Belgium. . . . We expected to see German savages prowling around ready at the slightest provocation to scalp women and children and perhaps provoke a quarrel with us for the same purpose!"

They had more questions than answers. Neither Hoover nor anyone else had been able to say what the work would entail. The CRB was—by the necessity of attempting such massive relief for the first time—making it up as it went along. And because conditions within sealed-off Belgium were sketchy at best, especially when it came to infrastructure, few outside the country knew what to expect within the country.

For instance, Millard K. Shaler, the American mining engineer who had arranged for the first food-relief purchase and had become a member of the CRB executive team, had made a statement widely circulated in the British press back in November. He had said that each delegate "will see that the shipments of food supplies arrive intact, and who must be informed of any infraction by German troops of the guarantee given by Baron von der Goltz. When this delegate, covered by the American flag, learns of such infraction, he will verify it, and immediately call attention to it, when the Ministers of Spain and America will make the proper representations to the German authorities."

Reality would prove that definition woefully inadequate.