

Soup and Stoicism - Feeding occupied Belgium during the Great War

by Alex Garcia

'Their politics were confined to bread and salt'
Mohandas K. Gandhi-

Introduction

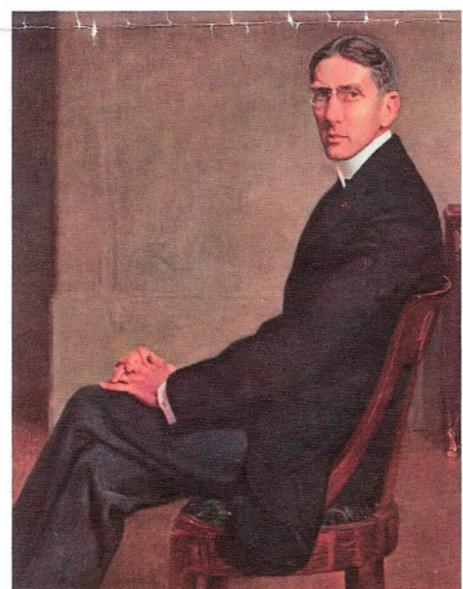
On 1 August 1914, Brand Whitlock, the US Minister to Belgium, was woken abruptly by the sound of knocking at his door. It was six o'clock in the morning but Omer—a Belgian soldier in full uniform— had news that could not wait. Upon opening the door, Whitlock saw Omer standing at attention, his hand in the saluting position. Before Omer said a word, Whitlock knew why he had woken him: 'C'est la guerre, Excellence,' Omer declared, before hurriedly leaving for town.

Germany had invaded Luxembourg and Omer had to report to his commanding officer and depart at once for Liège; the full mobilisation of the Belgian army had commenced.¹ On 2 August, Von Below, the German minister to Belgium, delivered an ultimatum to the Belgian government demanding free passage for the German Army through this tiny kingdom. Deliberation on this matter was brief. The following day, the Belgian government rejected this ultimatum: the soldiers at Liège would not lay down their arms, although outnumbered almost ten-to-one and so short on ammunition that range practice had been limited to one bullet per man per week—the tiny kingdom of Belgium would fight.

Under German control

The next day, 4 August, Belgium's seventy-five year-long status as a neutral nation ceased to matter. German troops began their siege of the fortified city of Liège and after ten ferocious days of fighting, the city fell and approximately one million German troops marched across the border.² Sporadic resistance continued, but for most of the country, the war was lost.

Within two weeks, approximately 90 percent of Belgium was under strict German control. King Albert and what was left of the Belgian army had fallen back to the Yser River, where they were finally reinforced by British and French troops. This relatively tiny chunk of land around the town of Ypres was the only part of Belgium that remained free from German occupation. Occupied Belgium was now cordoned off from the rest of the world. Trade with other countries ceased: nothing could go out and nothing could come in. Prices for food skyrocketed almost immediately, and a general panic—felt only by those who are experiencing some grave hardship for the first time—seized the country. Without any imports the question of how Belgium would feed itself quickly became a concern. As the world's most densely populated country, peacetime Belgium had relied on imports for much of its essential foodstuffs. For instance, it obtained 80 percent of its annual wheat supply—a product used in 80 percent of its prepared food— through imports from England and other countries.³



Mr Brand Whitlock, US Minister to Belgium.
Courtesy Anthony Langley - *The Great War in a different light*. www.greatwardifferent.com

Equipped with the fifth largest economy before the war, this policy worked well in times of peace. However, from August 1914 onwards, the British government, with the aim of keeping food and other supplies out of the hands of the occupying German forces, vehemently sought to block any goods from entering Belgian sea ports. And with the most formidable navy in the world trawling the North Sea, Britain was able to guarantee that nothing made it ashore.

International law, according to stipulations defined by the Hague conventions placed the onus of feeding the inhabitants of occupied Belgium on the shoulders of the occupying Germans forces,⁴ but it quickly became obvious that the German government did not plan on abiding by this mandate, unless the British naval blockades were raised. The British refused, and thus instead of bringing food into Belgium, the German Army took food out. After marauding their way into the heart of Belgium, the German Army began confiscating produce from the summer harvest and other Belgian foodstuffs en masse, in order to transport much of it back to the homeland.

Under the German occupation the people of Belgium suffered additional individual hardships, both physical and psychological. The occupying forces closed schools, shut down factories, and working men and women suffered the indignity of being replaced or simply put out of work by German officials, and, after less than two months of occupation, what had begun as concern over food had deteriorated into a crisis.

By September, Brand Whitlock was extremely anxious. He had been living in Belgium for some time before the war so he understood firsthand how dependent Belgium

was on imported food supplies and observed how rapidly the hunger crisis was escalating. Whitlock now sincerely believed that time was running out. So, on 26 September he sent President Woodrow Wilson a memo from Brussels in which he called upon the United States to come to the aid of the Belgian people because, as Whitlock lamented, 'now a grave situation confronts the land. In normal times Belgium produces only one-sixth of the foodstuffs she consumes. Within two weeks there will be no more food in Belgium.'⁵ Even if Whitlock was overly pessimistic in estimating two weeks, his urgent memo underscored the pressing reality that something had to be done to avoid the imminent onset of mass starvation.

Among the myriad individual hardships was there anything that unified the people of occupied Belgium? Was there any shared experience or event that brought this otherwise fractured nation together during the war? The Commission of Relief for Belgium (CRB) - an American-based aid agency spearheaded by none other than Herbert Hoover, which was responsible for bringing food and supplies over to occupied Belgium during the war - answered these questions by becoming an unlikely source of cohesion and unity for the people of this hobbled nation.

Two Belgiums

From this point until the end of the war there were in effect two Belgiums, one free and another under German occupation.⁶ Whilst much has been written about King Albert and the many ferocious battles around Ypres—the defence of free Belgium— scholars have only recently begun focusing their attention on the civilian population's experience of occupation during the war. Historiography on France and the Great War has also recently made this general turn from studies primarily focused on the war-front to those primarily focused on the home-front.

This study concentrates on the period from early August, 1914, when Germany invaded its neighbour, to April of 1917, when the United States entered the war on the side of the Entente powers; this was when the Commission for Relief in Belgium was primarily under the aegis of America.⁷ Aside from providing desperately needed nutritional relief, the Commission oversaw many unforeseen but positive outcomes for the people of occupied Belgium.

The cooking and distribution of free soup at *cantines* across the country provided Belgian aid workers with a sense of fulfillment in still being able to do something well, whilst so many workers were out of work; the Commission also ensured that the starving masses would at least get something to put in their stomachs every day. Thanks to the existence of these communal soup kitchens and the patient soup lines for the first time in the country's history people of all walks of life came together to share in a

common experience. This helped forge an inadvertent sense of community between many who would probably not have eaten in the same restaurant with one another during peacetime.

This unexpected sense of collectivity at least partially explains why hundreds of thousands of Belgians joined the Socialist Worker's Party shortly after the end of hostilities. To this end, this study sets out to show that food, whilst taken for granted in times of peace, was what mattered above all else to Belgians living in the occupied territory.

Soup

The most significant contribution of the CRB was the establishment of *cantines*. These charity soup kitchens began operating first in cities such as Brussels and Antwerp where the hunger crisis was much more pressing than in rural villages and towns.⁸ In general over the course of the war the hunger crisis was much more acute in cities where populations were more densely concentrated and where there were few individually owned plots of farmland on which to grow and harvest food.⁹

For the majority who did not have regular access to farmland, a scene unimaginable before the war - waiting in interminable lines with other bedraggled Belgians for a daily ration of soup and bread, usually in typical dreary and drizzly Belgian weather - quickly assumed an enforced normality.

This scenario became so habitual that one woman working at a soup kitchen was said to have remarked that the soup bucket had become the emblem of Belgium. However, she then quipped proudly, 'at least we Belgians make the best soup in the world.'¹⁰ This woman, like other working Belgians obviously found solace in doing as well as they could, whatever it was they still had some control over.

The strain of occupation

One must remember that just a few months earlier Belgium was an extremely prosperous and industrious nation. Being the fifth largest economy in the world, the people of Belgium did a lot of things very well. Almost every industry that had thrived before the war—lace making, coal mining, railroad manufacturing, munitions production, – was now either shut down or was functioning poorly.

Even within those industries that continued to function workers certainly did not derive nearly the same sense of pride and self-worth from working under the stain of military occupation as they had in times of freedom.

How could Belgians work happily if they reasonably suspected that the fruits of their labour would eventually be used to help Germany?

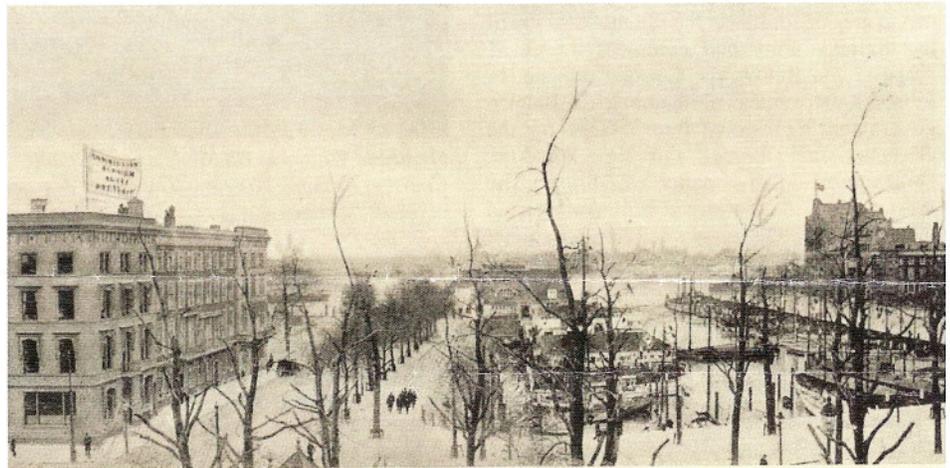
This loss of control over their own lives and the sudden absence of a clear sense of purpose were especially ignominious aspects of life under occupation. In the case of making soup for hungry Belgians, workers were not faced with any ambiguity as to who would benefit from the fruits of their labour.

After the CRB and its local affiliates on the ground in Belgium had set up a network of general *cantines* they began establishing a vast network of specialised soup kitchens to meet the specific regional needs of individual towns and villages. Some *cantines* served only undernourished babies and young children,



'La Soupe populaire' - a public soup kitchen.

Courtesy Anthony Langley - *The Great War in a different light*. www.greatwardifferent.com



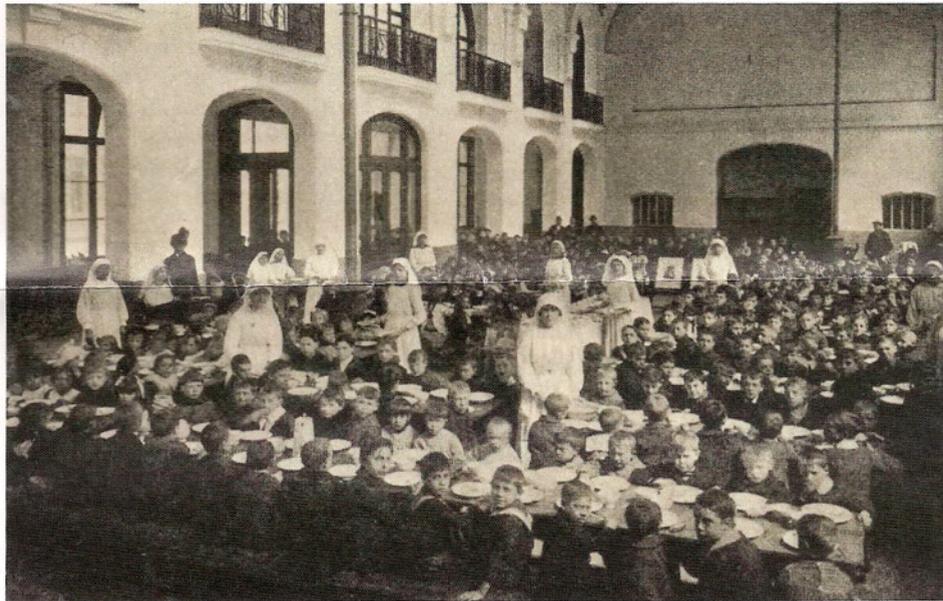
Offices de la Commission for Relief in Belgium à Rotterdam.

Courtesy Anthony Langley - *The Great War in a different light*. www.greatwardifferent.com



The Rotterdam Office of the Commission for Relief in Belgium.

Courtesy Anthony Langley - *The Great War in a different light*. www.greatwardifferent.com



whilst others focused on expectant or new mothers.¹¹

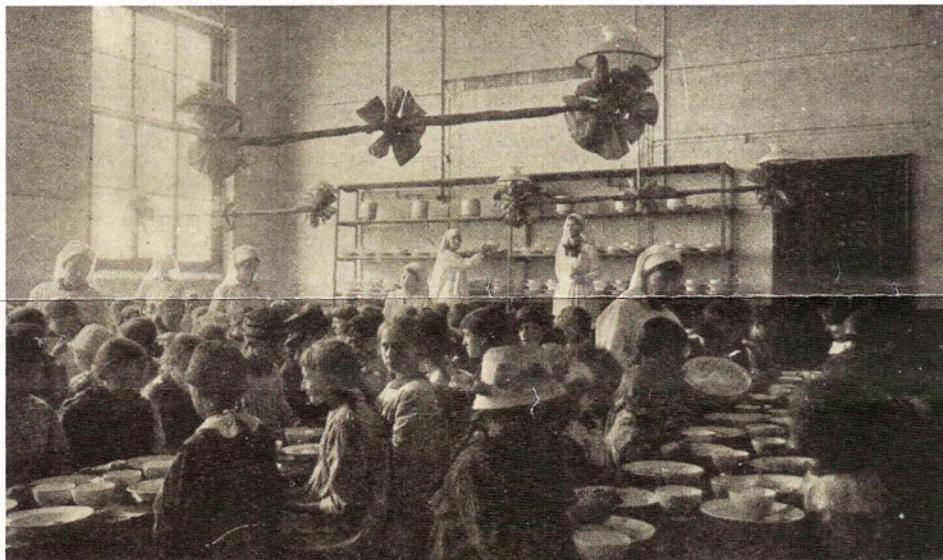
Women volunteers

It was mostly middle-class Belgian women who set up some 671 of these paediatric welfare centres during the war. In *cantines* serving expectant mothers, babies were weighed and monitored according to the newest advances in medicine. There were other *cantines* set up specifically for undernourished school age children. These *cantines* were established in countless places: in old school houses, churches, small country shacks and even aristocratic mansions; all became sites for this daily and arduous relief work.

Inside the *cantines* women (and some men) of all ages and classes worked side-by-side greeting the hungry, cutting vegetables, and ladling soup. Young girls, ejected from their jobs as telephone employees, toiled next to women of the nobility for the first time.¹² In the case of these *cantines* the pre-war gender roles of nurturing the young, cooking and cleaning, were reinforced in occupied Belgium. Women in unprecedented numbers were, however, playing a more pivotal role in the public sphere than they had before the invasion as organisers of these charitable soup kitchens.¹³

In order to feed the millions of hungry people who depended on them for their daily ration of soup for survival, the workers of these *cantines* demanded efficiency, endurance, and a willingness to stomach tedious repetition day in and day out. As indicated by Charlotte Kellogg, an American aid worker and the only American woman to be a member of the CRB, class meant little inside these *cantines* compared to one's ability to ceaselessly scoop and pour soup all day long. Upon asking to join a soup crew, one eager woman - whose appearance or social status was not even considered - was told to go home, fill her bathtub up and then spend all day removing the water one ladleful at a time until the tub was bone dry. The women working the soup line told her to repeat this chore for three days and then, if she was still willing, to return and join the line.¹⁴ The evidence indicates that an organic and localised hierarchy existed within these *cantines*. There was no central control and no one was officially in charge of hiring or firing aid workers. The system created was a simple meritocracy: The most seasoned aid workers at a particular section of a *cantine* would decide whether or not to hire a willing volunteer.

A canteen of the 'Little Bees'.
Courtesy Anthony Langley - *The Great War in a different light*. www.greatwardifferent.com



A meal for disabled children.
Courtesy Anthony Langley - *The Great War in a different light*. www.greatwardifferent.com



A canteen for mothers.
Courtesy Anthony Langley - *The Great War in a different light*. www.greatwardifferent.com

Common experience

Along with bringing women of all classes together inside these kitchens, the lines outside also saw people from all classes and all walks of life coming together and sharing a common experience for the first time. In line, 'there were those who had never succeeded; and then there were those who two years before had been comfortable—railway employees, artists, men and women, young and old, all wore the stamp of war.'¹⁵

This blurring of class lines is comparable to what transpired in the Second World War in England, where all except the most privileged waited in grocery lines, drank ale together at taverns and spent harrowing nights side-by-side in bomb shelters.

Some historians have argued that this

unforeseen phenomenon engendered a 'faith in collectivism,' which helped spur England's sudden shift to a socialist government immediately after the war.¹⁶ In the case of Belgium, the socialists did not win a majority in parliament immediately after the war, but they elected so many new representatives that the Catholic Party lost its absolute majority in the Chamber. And the Belgian population in general embraced socialism in droves. By 1919 400,000 Belgians had joined the socialist Worker's Party.¹⁷

According to historian Sophie De Schaepdrijver in this same year the POB (*Parti Ouvrier Belge* or Worker's party), became the most cohesive political party in Belgium.¹⁸ Doubtless, the resonance of this unprecedented wartime collectivity helped fuse the socialist party. This unexpected sense of community that was forged due to and around the relief effort also gave rise to the raft of progressive initiatives passed almost immediately after the war: universal suffrage was extended to all men over the age of twenty-one in 1919 and in the same year, a provision allowing 'war widows' the right to vote was also approved.¹⁹ Along with voting reforms, a minimum wage was enacted, the eight-hour working day was initiated and workers won the right to unionise and to strike.²⁰ All these reforms were in place by 1920.

The almost immediate availability of supplemental food relief served an important and far less quantifiable purpose than can be expressed in graphs of caloric intake and protein content. Everyday life in Belgium had changed dramatically and literally overnight - German troops imperiously patrolled the streets, 'closed' signs hung in neighbourhood shops and restaurants, railroads no longer ran, miners no longer dug, hundreds of thousands of workers - accustomed to living routine, mostly predictable lives - suddenly found themselves unemployed and grappling with the reality that food still needed to be put on the table. Life for the coal miner was certainly not easy before the occupation, but he at least had had a sense of continuity in that he knew what he had to do from one day to the next.

This sense of continuity and relative certainty - almost entirely shattered in so many facets of everyday life - was preserved to a degree by the daily ritual of eating soup at one's local *cantine*. First, it gave those who had no savings before the invasion, and thus could not afford to feed themselves and their families adequately, a sense of security that at the very least they and their loved ones would have a bowl of soup to put in their stomachs each day.

Symbolic and comforting

The seemingly endless waiting experienced by those waiting in lines for soup might appear tedious and intolerable to people today, but for many Belgians, this daily ritual served as a welcome alternative to being forced to 'earn' their bread by working under the jurisdiction of German soldiers. Charlotte Kellogg observed that many Belgians gladly risked 'all the evils of continued non-employment rather than...serve in any way the ends of the invader.'²¹ Of course some did work, but many

simply refused.

To a people who were suddenly being forced at the tip of a bayonet to live according to German rules and German ways of life (even according to German time-of-day), a bowl of homemade soup prepared by Belgians, became highly symbolic and comforting. As anyone familiar with Belgian culture knows, the serving of soup at mealtimes is done with almost religious regularity; thus, this daily bowl of soup, distinctly Belgian in taste, became a way to preserve a shared aspect of distinctly Belgian pre-war culture. The brief sense of normalcy certainly felt by many while eating their fresh soup was undoubtedly comforting in the entirely unpredictable time of war.

For the men and women who volunteered at the kitchens, many of whom had been put out of work because of the invasion, the daily work of preparing and serving soup gave them a definable and fulfilling reason to get out of bed in the morning. The provision of food came to play a significant role in daily life under German occupation. For many Belgians living under the imposition of German ways of life, their cultural identity was preserved in the daily bowl of distinctly Belgian soup they ate.

Furthermore, aside from nourishing millions, these *cantines*, scattered all across the country, genuinely helped alleviate unemployment and the food relief effort in general helped propel occupied Belgium's faltering economy. For instance, the millions of sacks used to carry flour into Belgium were used as raw materials in many faltering industries. Unemployed lace workers, artisans and other people familiar with textiles converted these coarse sacks into pillows, sweaters, shirts and countless other essentials for those in need at home and at the front.²²

Thanks in a large part to the relief efforts of the CRB - specifically with regard to the importation of food - the people of Belgium were able for the most part to keep the foundations of their country intact over the fifty month period of occupation.

This food relief also provided occupied society with a sense of dignity and the necessary strength to endure life under German rule without collaborating with the German cause. The sense of some form of continuity building on the years before the war played a profoundly positive role in Belgium's rapid post-war recovery and although there were some exceptions, solidarity against the German rule was almost unanimous. Belgium—unlike France after the Second World War - would not have to reckon with the stain of widespread collaboration. At war's end, Belgium found itself morally whole, but still in need of help physically. Consequently, the relief effort did not end with the signing of the Armistice: there were still thousands of hungry mouths to feed. But, what happened after the war is another story.

In conclusion, the reality was that, after four and half years of peril both the CRB and the nation of Belgium were still intact. Perhaps this was no coincidence. Food - perhaps above all else - was what mattered to the people in occupied Belgium.

References

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- 2 S.L.A. Marshall, *World War One*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), pp.60-64.
- 3 Peter Scholliers and Frank Daelemans, *Standard of Living and Standards of Health in wartime Belgium*. Essay published in *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work, and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918*. Edited by Richard Wall and Jay Winter, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.140.
- 4 Brand Whitlock, *Belgium: A Personal Narrative*, (New York: D. Appleton Company, 1919), vol. II, p.185.
- 5 Whitlock, *The Journal and Letters*, p. 181.
- 6 This idea of two Belgiums came from Henri Pirenne's, *Histoire de Belgique des Origines a Nos Jours*, Brussels, 1975, vol. V, p.347.
- 7 After the United States entered the war on the side of the Entente Powers the functions of the relief effort to Belgium were transferred to Dutch auspices.
- 8 Wall and Winter., p.141.
- 9 Sophie De Schaepdrijver, *The Idea of Belgium*, article published in *European Culture in The Great War*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1999, Edited by Avieli Roshwald and Richard Stites, p.107.
- 10 Herbert Hoover, *An American Epic: The Relief of Belgium and Northern France 1914-1930*. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1959), p.13.
- 11 Charlotte Kellogg, *Women of Belgium: Turning Tragedy to Triumph*, (New York: Funk And Wagnalis Company, 1917), pp.112-115.
- 12 Kellogg, p.122.
- 13 Evidence of this is seen throughout Kellogg's work.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp.22,23 and 121, 122.
- 15 Kellogg, p.21.
- 16 Clayton Roberts and David Roberts, *A History of England: 1688 to Present*. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), pp. 797-798.
- 17 De Schaepdrijver, *La Belgique*, p.297.
- 18 De Schaepdrijver, *La Belgique*, p.297.
- 19 De Schaepdrijver, *La Belgique*, p.296.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp.297,298.
- 21 Kellogg, p.126.
- 22 Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum archival website. <http://hoover.archives.gov/exhibits/collections/featureditem/featureditem.html>, 1-7.