On March 29, 1914, Lou Henry Hoover turned 40 years old. A few months later her husband, Herbert, did likewise. Living in London with their sons Herbert (11) and Allan (7), these two native Iowans were yearning for the day when they could uproot themselves from the Old World and return permanently to the New. For years, Hoover—a highly successful, peripatetic mining engineer with enterprises that girdled the globe—had been planning to come home to America and enter what he called the “big game” of public service. Having achieved his ambition of becoming a millionaire by the age of 40, he frankly felt that “just making money isn’t enough.” He wanted to do something more.

The events of August 1914 gave him his opportunity, on a stage and scale that he could never have imagined. August 10, 1914, was his 40th birthday, but it is doubtful that he and Lou did much celebrating. As leading American residents of London, they were already immersed in coordinating relief assistance for panic-stricken American travelers fleeing the outbreak of war on the European continent. Just six days before Hoover’s birthday, Great Britain had declared war on imperial Germany—the final salvo in a six-week chain reaction that had turned a crisis in the Balkans into a global catastrophe. In London, on August 4, the banks were closed, Hoover’s mining business was paralyzed, and American tourists by the thousands were vainly searching for passage home. Writing to a friend on that fateful August day, Hoover remarked: “If my judgment of the situation is right, we are on the verge of seven years of considerable privation.”

The American engineer’s prescience was remarkable. For the next seven years, privation did indeed engulf much of the world, and the struggle against it became the overarching theme of Hoover’s life during that period. Not personal privation, of course: Hoover himself remained financially independent. Nor was the
As chair of the European Relief Council, Herbert Hoover inspects supplies headed to Europe from a Brooklyn pier, January 1921. Kitty Dalton, representing the Knights of Columbus, assists. During and after World War I, Hoover oversaw massive relief efforts to aid war-torn Europe.

larger struggle one that he had been obligated to confront. No, he could have avoided it if he had wanted to and—by virtue of his strategic place in international mining ventures—could have profited immensely from a warring world’s misfortune. Instead, by a combination of duty, desire to serve, and (one suspects) sheer love of accomplishment, Hoover, with his wife’s assent and assistance, consecrated himself to a mission to relieve the suffering of those whose lives were shattered by war. From 1914 to 1921—and even, to some extent, beyond—war, revolution, and peacemaking were to absorb the energies and suffuse the consciousness of them both.

Consider briefly the scale of the responsibilities that Hoover accepted during and after the Great War. While European armies bogged down in the trenches in 1914 and succeeding years, Hoover—working without pay—founded and administered the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB). This neutral, benevolent organization acquired, transported, and delivered nearly 5 million metric tons of food to more than 9 million civilian inhabitants of Belgium and northern France who were caught between a hostile German army of occupation and a British naval blockade. What began as an emergency relief effort directed by a London-based, American mining engineer evolved into a colossal humanitarian undertaking without precedent in world history.

When the United States entered the war in 1917, Hoover returned home. Soon he became head of the U.S. Food Administration, an agency created at the request of President Woodrow Wilson. Hoover’s challenge was formidable: he must—by suasion, if possible; by coercion, if necessary—stimulate American food production, reduce American food consumption, curb inflation of food prices, and create a substantial food surplus for export to America’s needy allies. “Food Will Win the War” was his slogan—an exaggeration, perhaps, but not if stated negatively; a dearth of food would surely lose the conflict. By the autumn of 1918, America, with Hoover’s guidance, had become a reliable source of food for its beleaguered British, French, and Italian allies.

On November 16, 1918—just five days after the Armistice—Hoover set sail for Europe to organize food distribution to a continent careening towards disaster. In the months following the end of World War I, across vast stretches of Europe, famine, disease, and bloody revolution threatened a civilization already traumatized by “the war to end war.” While Allied leaders struggled to draft a peace treaty at Versailles, Hoover, as the
Des Moines Register cartoonist J. N. "Ding" Darling depicted Uncle Sam with gifts labeled "Merry Christmas to Ourselves," while Hoover stands over an empty kettle. The cartoon, published in December 1920, accompanied an appeal from Hoover to American charity for central and eastern Europe.

Director-General of Relief for the Allied and Associated Powers and chairman of the American Relief Administration (ARA), organized the delivery of food to millions of desperate people.

The task that Hoover and his associates performed was no routine process of sending food to the needy; it was a herculean undertaking of immense complexity. Millions of tons of supplies had to be purchased from all over the world, shipped to Europe, and distributed in more than 20 nations. Many of these countries had only rudimentary governmental machinery; in some, communication had broken down and transportation services were chaotic. Every frontier was a barrier of suspicion; ethnic tensions and separatist impulses abounded. Yet from November 1918 to September 1919, Hoover and his ARA colleagues coordinated the delivery of more than 4 million metric tons of food and other supplies. The infant republic of Austria, for instance, perhaps the most desperately afflicted of any country in all Europe, received more than a half-million metric tons of supplies at a time when its own food sources were severely depleted and its financial plight seemed nearly insuperable.

But the American-led relief program entailed much more than simply supplying food to starving populations. Economic rehabilitation and increased productivity were also critical for Europe's recovery. Many of Hoover's initiatives in 1919 were designed to achieve that objective. He arranged for hundreds of American engineers and other experts to become technical advisers to the governments of Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia. These advisers, some of whom stayed for three years, helped to reorganize railways, create efficient transportation networks, reform currencies, and modernize agriculture. Hoover also helped to establish the Inter-Allied Danube River Commission, which labored to clear that vital riverway for commercial traffic. And, with the approval of the Allied governments, he dispatched American agents to Silesia and other European mining regions, where they helped to settle strikes and increase urgently needed coal production. Along with the food relief, these efforts undoubtedly helped to stem the advance of Bolshevik revolution from the east.

With the signing of the peace treaties in the summer of 1919, Hoover's relief and reconstruction efforts entered a new phase under nongovernmental auspices. For the next four years he concentrated on providing assistance in the form of daily meals to the children of eastern and central Europe as well as to certain particularly distressed sectors of the population.

Conditions were appalling. Medical examinations in 1919 disclosed that 96 percent of the children of Vienna under the age of 15 (to take but one example) were undernourished. With the cooperation of dedicated volunteers from many countries, and with the support of their governments, the American Relief Administration's European Children's Fund eventually provided daily food for an estimated 3 million European children at thousands of separate relief stations.

One of Hoover's innovations that helped to address this crisis was the creation of a form of remittance known as food drafts, by which American citizens could send aid to their kinfolk in Europe. Americans could purchase
3,500,000 Starving Children In Central Europe

"WELCOME INVISIBLE GUEST!"
Keep alive at least one European Child until the next harvest, $10.00 will do it

European Relief Council

BUY INVISIBLE GUEST CERTIFICATE NOW

"National Collection" For the Suffering Children of Central and Eastern Europe
such drafts at banks in the United States and mail them to their relatives in Europe. The Europeans could then present the drafts at American relief warehouses established in their own country and receive in exchange standardized packages of food worth the amount stated on the draft. It was an ingenious device that allowed individual Americans to relieve the suffering of starving Europeans without sending food packets that might be lost or stolen en route. To provide these food allotments, Hoover’s organization set up more than 60 warehouses in five European countries. In all, more than 400,000 food drafts were sold and delivered, and more than 14,000 metric tons of food were thereby distributed.

No wonder, then, that President Wilson labeled the ARA the “Second American Expeditionary Force to Save Europe.” In 1919 and later, Hoover’s far-flung apparatus seemed truly on the march. In Estonia, for instance, at one time nearly one child in four received regular meals from Hoover-led agencies. In Poland, as many as 1.3 million children per day received ARA-supplied food at the peak of the organization’s efforts. Undoubtedly the most extraordinary ARA undertaking occurred more than two years after the war ended, in Soviet Russia. There, from 1921 to 1923, at the request of Communist authorities, Hoover’s agency administered a vast relief program to combat a devastating famine in the Volga River region. At its peak the organization fed upwards of 10 million people per day. Between 1919 and 1923 Hoover and his associates delivered more than 768,000 metric tons of supplies to more than 20 million people in Russia and other Soviet-held territory. So great was this assistance that some historians believe it indirectly stabilized Lenin’s Bolshevist regime. Whatever the merits of that contention, for ordinary Russians the immediate gain was palpable.

In short, between 1914 and 1923 Herbert Hoover directed, financed, or assisted a multitude of international humanitarian relief efforts without parallel in history. During that nearly ten-year period, the Commission for Relief in Belgium, the U.S. Food Administration, the American Relief Administration, and various other institutions and governments delivered nearly 34 million metric tons of food to the lands and people imperiled by World War I and its aftermath. The monetary value of that sustenance exceeded $5 billion, a figure that, in today’s currency, would approach $50 billion.

For most of this astonishing undertaking, Herbert Hoover had high administrative responsibility. Thus Hoover as “food regulator for the world” (as General
such drafts at banks in the United States and mail them to their relatives in Europe. The Europeans could then present the drafts at American relief warehouses established in their own country and receive in exchange stan-

In March, 1916, the Relief Committee in New York City, working in conjunction with the International Committee of the Red Cross and other international relief agencies, established a scheme for the distribution of mezuzahs to Jewish relief organizations in Europe. The scheme was designed to provide a means of identification for Jews in the countries overrun by the German armies. The mezuzahs were placed on the doors of the homes of Jewish survivors of the massacre in the former Austrian Empire and in the countries overrun by the German armies. The scheme was sponsored by the American Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. It was carried out under the direction of the Relief Committee in New York City. The mezuzahs were distributed throughout Europe, and the scheme was highly successful in identifying Jewish survivors of the massacre.
Hunger and malnutrition stalked European children even after war ended in 1918. Hoover turned his focus to providing daily meals for them at thousands of feeding stations. Pershing called him) earned the epithet “the Great Humanitarian.” How many people owed their lives to his endeavors? Precise statistics were never compiled in many instances, but one Hoover scholar, after carefully studying the relevant data, concluded that between 1914 and 1923 more than 83 million men, women, and children in more than 20 nations received food allotments for which Hoover and his associates were at least partly responsible. This figure does not include the 120 million people in Great Britain, France, and Italy (America’s wartime allies) who received critically needed foodstuffs from the United States in 1917–1918—a form of “foreign aid” that cannot be considered humanitarian assistance in the ordinary sense of the term.

Eighty-three million people: it is a staggering figure. But whether this estimate is high or low, the bottom line is irrefutable: as someone remarked a number of years ago, Herbert Hoover was responsible for saving more lives than any other person in history.

Calamities of this magnitude could not fail to transform the human beings caught up in them, and such was the case with Herbert Hoover. In ways both obvious and subtle, the First World War and its aftermath remolded his life, even as he changed the lives of others.

For Hoover, the emotional strain of the war manifested itself not in his oft-interrupted family life but in what he experienced on and near the European battlefields. On December 1, 1914, for instance, he visited a canteen in Brussels where some of the city’s destitute queued up for their daily ration. As Hoover and the American minister to Belgium watched, hundreds of the poor stood uncomplainingly in the rain, shivering, grasping bowls and pitchers and the precious little cards that would guarantee them a meal. Upon receiving his or her allotment, each would pause, bow, and utter the single word: “Merci.” Tears welling in his eyes, the American minister had to look away. Hoover, too, averted his gaze and silently stared into the distance. After that traumatic experience, Hoover rarely ventured near a Belgian bread line again. According to Lou, her husband would not visit one “unless literally compelled
to" and would have "his eyes near full of tears before
he leaves." The "pathos" (as he put it) of "the long line
of expectant, chattering mites" (Belgian children)—
each with a ticket of authority pinned to its chest or
held in its grimy fist"—was for this orphaned Iowa
man too much to bear.

Nor could Hoover forget the glimpses he saw of the
Battle of the Somme from behind German lines in northern France in the summer of 1916. It was a scene that
haunted his memory for years: "In the distant view lay
the unending blur of trenches, of volcanic explosions of
dust, which filled the air where over a length of sixty
miles a million and a half men were fighting and dying.
Once in a while, like ants, the lines of men seemed to
show through the clouds of dust. Here under the thun-
der and belching volcanoes of 10,000 guns, over the
months of this battle, the lives of Germans and English-
men were thrown away.... Down the left side came the
unending lines of wounded men, the 'walking cases'
staggering among cavalcades of ambulances. A quarter
of a million men died and it was but one battle in that
war." Above all, perhaps, Hoover could never forget what
he witnessed in Warsaw in August 1919. Shortly before
his planned return to the United States from Paris, the
head of the American Relief Administration decided to
visit several central European countries that had ben-
etited prodigiously from his humanitarian aid. When
the Polish government learned of his intentions, it pre-
pared to honor him with a "children's festival" on Au-
gust 14. Tens of thousands of Polish children paraded
in Hoover's honor that afternoon. At one point a group
of them captured a startled rabbit on the racecourse
grounds and bore it triumphantly to their benefactor in
the reviewing stand. Hoover wept unabashedly. With
moments like these to sear one's soul, the personal sac-
ifices of the past five years probably seemed miniscule
by comparison. How many of those Polish children that
summer day would have been alive if Hoover had done
nothing to feed them?

The unceasing weight of responsibility that Hoover
carried during these "seven years of privation" ap-
peared to take a psychic toll. Some years later Lou Henry
Hoover confided to her children: "A certain definite,
and very original, kind of joy of life was stamped out of
him by those war years. Can you remember that as a
fun-making, fun-enjoying person he completely
changed? Not that he became altogether solemn and
serious, not that a quaint whimsicality does not persist
and is highly entertaining, but the old sparkling spon-
taneity is now only occasionally glimpsed far below the
surface."

The effect of the war and peacemaking on Hoover
was not only psychological but also intellectual. When
the humanitarian hero returned at last to America's
shores on September 13, 1919, he was not a contented
man. For several months he had pleaded with the Al-
lied leaders at Versailles to lift their blockade of Germany
and allow the healing currents of peaceful ex-
change to flow. Only af-
after a long, wearisome
struggle did he attain his
objective. Every day at
the peace conference he
had witnessed a dispir-
ting display of national
rivalry, greed, myopia,
and vengefulness. He
had seen, too, the some-
times violent attempts of
reformers and radicals
to construct a new social
order on the principles
of Marxist socialism. It
was a time, he observed,
of "stupendous social
ferment and revolu-
tion."

Hoover returned to
his native land (he soon
told friends) with “two convictions... dominant in my mind.” The first was that the ideology of socialism, as tested before him in Europe, was a catastrophic failure. Socialism’s fundamental premises, said Hoover, were false—the premises that the “impulse of altruism” could alone maintain productivity and that bureaucracy at the top could determine the most productive roles for each individual. Only the “primary school of competition,” Hoover countered, could do that. Oblivious to that truth and to the fundamental human impulse of self-interest, socialism had “wrecked itself on the rock of production.” It was unable to motivate men and women to produce sufficient goods for the needs of society. And without increased productivity, neither social harmony nor an improved standard of living for the masses would occur. To Hoover the economic demoralization of Europe in 1919, with its attendant shortages and suffering, was the direct result of the bankruptcy of socialism.

Hoover’s second conviction was also firmly held. More than ever before he sensed the “enormous distance” that America had drifted from Europe in its 150 years of nationhood, a distance reflected, he said, in “our outlook on life, our relations toward our neighbors and our social and political ideals.” Hoover implored his fellow citizens not to turn their country into “a laboratory for experiment in foreign social diseases.” Instead, he said, “A definite American substitute is needed for these disintegrating theories of Europe”—a substitute grounded in “our national instincts” and “the normal development of our national institutions.” In numerous speeches and articles in 1919–1920, Hoover began to define this American “substitute.” The foundation of the distinctive American social philosophy, he asserted, was the principle of equality of opportunity: the idea that no one should be “handicapped in securing that particular niche in the community to which his abilities and character entitle him.” Unlike Europe, where oppressive class barriers had generated misery and discontent, the American social system was based on “negation of class.” A society, said Hoover, in which there is “a constant flux of individuals in the community, upon the basis of ability and character, is a moving virile mass.” Such a society, Hoover fervently believed, was America.

In the months and years to come, Hoover attempted to distill from his experiences abroad a coherent understanding of the American experiment he so cherished. Repeatedly the questions of 1919 recur: How could America avoid the follies and convulsions that he had seen in Europe? How could the American system be strengthened in an age of global revolution? Why was America so different? Why was America unique?

More than most American presidents and public figures, Hoover seemed driven to codify and systematize his political beliefs. One source of that compulsion was his raw, turbulent experience of war and hunger between 1914 and the early 1920s—an upheaval that disturbed not only his home life but also the furniture of his mind. One result of that compulsion was a little volume called American Individualism that he published in 1922. Another was a book of political philosophy titled The Challenge to Liberty, which appeared in 1934.

In 1919 Hoover’s estrangement from Europe was not so deep as to prevent him from advocating American involvement in its affairs. He was, in fact, an ardent advocate of American entrance into the League of Nations and of ratification of the flawed Treaty of Versailles (with or without reservations), in part to facilitate...
Europe’s postwar rehabilitation (a humanitarian objective) and in part out of American self-interest (a prosperous Europe was vital to America’s own welfare, he believed).

But as the years passed, Hoover’s antipathy toward Europe gradually intensified. To him it came to seem that not just fundamental differences but “irreconcilable conflicts” in ideals and experience separated the Old World from the New. The New World, he came to believe, was remote from the imperialism, fanatic ideologies, “age-old hates,” racial antipathies, dictatorships, power politics, and class stratification of Europe. What he had witnessed in 1919 at Versailles, he concluded, was something far more profound than “the intrigues of diplomacy or the foibles of European statesmen.” It was “the collision of civilizations that had grown three hundred years apart.”

These outspoken sentiments undergirded Hoover’s vehement opposition in 1939 to 1941 to American belligerency in the war between Nazi Germany and its enemies. They also colored his attitude toward foreign aid to Europe in the late 1940s and to American strategy in the early years of the Cold War. They may also have indirectly affected—and here we speculate—his response to the organization of relief at home during the Great Depression. In contrast to much of Europe in 1919, where his American aid workers had imposed administrative control from above, the United States—he seemed to believe in 1930–1932—needed no such intervention. America, to Hoover, was different: in America the people at the grassroots had the resources, the skills, and the idealism to take care of themselves and their neighbors. For Hoover the unforgettable experiences of 1914–1921 cast a very long shadow indeed.

When Hoover, his wife, and son Allan disembarked in New York on September 13, 1919, Hoover bluntly told a reporter that he never cared to see Europe again. But he could not stay away. In 1938 he returned to Europe on a partly sentimental journey during which he met former relief associates, visited his old residence in London, and had an interview with Adolf Hitler. In 1946 and 1947, then in his 70s, he undertook strenuous global humanitarian missions at the request of President Truman. In the 1950s he twice visited Western Europe as a representative of the United States government. Even in old age, the affairs of the Old World were very much with him.

And none more than the travails of 1914 to 1921, which he, more than anyone else, had done so much to alleviate. In the final years of his life, Hoover’s thoughts turned increasingly to that tempestuous yet profoundly productive period in his long career. In 1958 he published The Ordeal of Woodrow Wilson—a remarkable account of President Wilson’s tragic struggles at Versailles that was also, in part, a narrative of Hoover’s concurrent battles as American relief administrator. Even more remarkably, between 1959 and 1964 (that is, between the ages of 85 and 90), he wrote and published a massive, four-volume history of the American-led “enterprises in compassion” that had brought food relief to scores of millions of people after World Wars I and II. He called his story An American Epic. And although he gave due credit to the many agencies and individuals who contributed to that unprecedented saga of benevolence, in large measure the story that he told was inevitably autobiographical.

A number of years ago a British politician wrote an autobiography titled Old Men Forget. By contrast, Herbert Hoover remembered. To his dying day he remembered the stormy years when, with his wife’s untiring support, he had appeared on the world’s stage as—in one admirer’s words—the “Napoleon of Mercy.” To his dying day he interpreted his “epic” within the framework of a philosophy of American exceptionalism forged by the bittersweet memories of those years. He was entitled to remember, and so should we, for Herbert Hoover was responsible for saving more lives than any other person in history.

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