

Address given by Herbert Hoover (London, 3-6 April 1946)

Caption: Between 3 and 6 April 1946, at the Emergency Conference on European Cereals Supplies, Herbert Hoover, the US Secretary of Commerce, announces the results of his fact-finding operation on the food situation in Europe.

Source: Emergency Conference on European Cereals Supplies held in London from 3rd to 6th April 1946. London: 1946. p. 88-91.

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"It is an honor to be asked to address this Conference. The very purpose of the Conference is based on the knowledge that the few months until the next harvest are the most critical food period in all modern history. With the coming harvest, world food problems are by no means ended, but with favorable weather conditions, the situation after the harvest will be much easier. We shall have a breathing spell. The hungry wolf now at the door of the world should then go away. The next few months are the crux of the problem.

You may be interested in some impressions I have received as to the countries we have visited and others from which we have more information than is to be derived from documentary reports. In this mission, I have been accompanied by Dr. FitzGerald, of the United States Department of Agriculture, and Messrs. Gibson, Tuck, Pate, and Galpin, officials of the relief in 1919.

The apprehensions which I entertained before beginning this journey have not decreased. They have increased. Hunger sits at the table thrice daily in hundreds of millions of homes. And the specter of possible starvation haunts equal }/ the halls of government and squalid hovels in the ruins of war.

The world uses the words "starvation" and "famine" very loosely. Some travelers glibly report there is no widespread death-dealing famine on the Continent of Europe. In modern civilization, whole nations do not lie down and die. The casual observers do not realize that famine would have already struck great groups and classes were it not for past overseas supplies, and that it is inevitable unless we land, for the next months, every ton of overseas food that we can summon. And nothing is more preposterous than the opinions of travelers on the Continent who live on black market food at prices out of reach of ninety-nine per cent, of the people.

And let me say at once that paper reports do not convey the information or give the basis for conclusions that come from personal investigation on the spot. Only by personal contact with officials and especially by intimate discussions with the leaders of the many different relief agencies who are working intimately among the people, can information be checked and cross-checked. Only by judgment upon this information on the spot by men inexperienced in food problems does the picture become clear.

I may say at once that I always distrust statistics in discussing problems of hunger. They convey little of the weight of human suffering that lies behind them. But there is—no other way of painting the picture in its definite, and often grim, perspective.

The situation varies among all of the nations on the Continent. And it varies among groups within each country. There is some pressure on nearly every one of these twenty-two nations of 300,000,000 people from the Russian frontier to the English Channel. There are only four or five small nations, aggregating possibly 40,000,000 people, which can be said to have assured supplies until the next harvest.

We may particularize the problem still further. The bitter experience of centuries of war has instilled a squirrel-like instinct in the peasants of Europe to store for the protection of their own families. Thus, possibly one-third can take care of themselves—they are the "self-suppliers" of statistics. There are some exceptions to this rule in areas stricken with most unusual drought.

The major impact of shortages thus falls upon the city and industrial areas in the sixteen or seventeen nations in which there are over 170,000,000 people. The prevalence in many countries of black markets permits a small class mostly by sacrifice of their savings, to provide supplementary food at prices prohibitive to the great mass of people. Some industrial groups, such as miners and other heavy workers, are receiving priorities in food in a desperate endeavor to maintain essential services. Thus, again the dangerous area narrows a few millions more.

However, the mainstay of the great city masses today is the government ration. The medial government ration in only a few of these nations exceeds 1,250 calories per day, and in over half the estimated city masses it does not exceed 1,000 calories. These masses, by various devices and some free "commodities,

secure some supplements. Indications are that the supplements range from 200 to 500 calories. When you define the words "starvation" and "famine," it might be well to set some caloric standards, considering that about 2,300 calories of balanced medial ration is regarded as the minimum for health. On any definition, millions are today at the danger level.

But even that is not the whole story. The stocks in hand and supplies en route with which to maintain the meagre government rations will not last, in many countries, beyond the end of May, and in some of them only to the end of April.

Nor is even this the whole story. The predominant diet of these city masses is very short of protein and fats. Adults can stand this for long stretches of time, but the effect upon children is disastrous. The first expression of famine is to be found among the children. Infant mortality in some cities exceeds 20 per cent, a year. This is an indication of slow famine.

It would not be an immoderate estimate that from the Russian frontier to the Channel there are today twenty millions of children who are not only badly undernourished, but steadily developing tuberculosis, rickets, anemia and other diseases of subnormal feeding. There may be a much larger number.

If Europe is to have a future, something must be done about these children. Unless they are better fed, many will die and others will grow up with stunted bodies and distorted minds. They will furnish more malevolents in the world.

It is true that efforts are being made to aid the children. Some Governments are giving food to school children. There are priorities in dairy products for children in some nations, but even so, milk supplies in many cities are so meagre as to serve only to slow up the starvation of children. Some Governments are conducting feeding stations for under-school age. What I saw of it, and my information from all sources including voluntary charitable organizations, shows that all these efforts are pitifully limited because of the lack of proper supplies.

The American, British, Swiss and Swedish religious relief organizations, and Red Cross societies, are doing splendid work, but the efforts are limited. These agencies probably do not provide adequate food for more than 500,000 children altogether. They have only touched the fringes of the problem.

It is a matter of profound regret that the experience of the last World War was not followed and an effective organization set up to give one extra meal of 400 or 500 calories a day to all undernourished children and certain classes of mothers. Experience shows that the normal recuperative powers of children is such that, if not too far gone, a few months of food "of the right kind could recover much of the losses of years of privation. There is abundant proof of this in the handling of ten to fifteen million subnormal children in this way in 1919 and 1920. Strong bodies and clear minds were created in the vast majority of those served.

The rehabilitation of children cannot wait. It cannot be postponed until some other day. They are not like a bridge or a factory. They lose ground every day that is lost. Already almost a year has been lost. The world cannot hate children, even of the enemy. Our children must live in the same world with them. Nor is this a question of vast quantities of food ; such an extra meal a day would not involve the import of more than four thousand tons a month for every one million children.

It is not too late to expand this work at once, and it is imperative to prepare for its continuance over the next twelve months.

One of the major problems before you is the supplies for the basic governmental rations on the Continent. Their demands for the months until harvest aggregate possibly 5,000,000 tons of cereals. And fats are needed. Some of this burden of cereals is being carried by the generous action of Russia. The supplies from the Western Hemisphere must also be divided to the United Kingdom and the Far East, where there is also desperate need.

The present visible supplies may be augmented by the conservation measures in the United States. They could be augmented if South America can be aided in their efforts to co-operate. But after all this effort, there is still a gap in full supplies. This can mean but one thing for importing nations : every nation must expect to tighten its belt. Every measure of self-help must be exhausted. The American people, under President Truman's leadership, have responded generously to the call for drastic reduction in their consumption of breadstuffs and fats. We shall scrape the bottom of the barrel.

I am impressed with the fact that there is not, nor has there been, a sufficiently effective over-all organization of world food since hostilities ceased. We do have the excellent work of the Combined Food Board in Washington, but they influence only a part of the surplus-producing countries. UNRRA, which is perhaps thought to serve such an over-all purpose, covers less than thirty per cent of the people from the Channel to the Russian border who are short of food. Whether nations buy their food or get it on charity, or from armies, they are drawing on the common stock and they are competing with each other for supplies.

Had such a central organization been really functioning in the world last September, with a realistic appraisal of European production, the crisis would have been realized then, instead of five months later. Larger supplies could have been had if both surplus and importing countries had taken more extensive steps earlier to conserve food. Some of the present suffering and physical degeneration would have been lessened. The outstanding heed for the future is more effective co-ordination.

It is inconceivable that European agriculture will have made full recovery, even in the ground crops, with the harvest of 1946. The recovery of livestock will be slower than ground crops, and while the meat and fat situation should improve with good harvests, it will take two or three years, at least, for their recovery. The final voice of victory is the guns. But the first voice of peace is food. The world has organized to maintain peace. Surely it can organize to maintain life.

Gentlemen, the responsibility of saving human life rests heavily upon the world. We have emerged from a terrible era of killing of men, women and children. The world must look forward with hope, and the dawn of that hope can be made - glorious by an era of saving of health and life."