

The Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food. By Lizzie Collingham.
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Reviewed by Mark Harrison.

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Industrialized war came suddenly to Europe. In the war of 1870, according to Martin van Creveld, food and fodder accounted for more than 99 percent of supplies of the Prussian army that invaded France. After 1914 ammunition was already the greater part, and by 1945 the overwhelming part of the supply of armies. This rapid turnaround reflected the pressure that leaders placed upon followers to copy each other. As one country led the way to industrialized warfare, the others had to follow suit as quickly as possible in order to stay in the game.

Rising quantities of guns, shells, tanks, planes, and ships came to dominate the calculations of generals and the mobilization of entire economies. Yet, while falling rapidly in proportion to the vast quantities of resources directed to the front, food did not become less of an issue. In wartime, it was no longer just the soldiers that had to be fed. With industrialized warfare, the fighting power of a country was defined increasingly by its cities and factories and by the people that lived in them and operated them. The people whom it was vital to feed in wartime included growing numbers of civilians. Ensuring the continuous nutrition of more and more people meant that governments had to worry more about food, not less.

The Taste of War is about the consequences, which were far reaching. To begin with, getting enough food to the right people was a problem in economic mobilization. This could be a major problem in its own right, especially for those countries that retained a significant share of small-scale family farmers. Family farmers presented the following pattern of behaviour: when war mobilization disrupted supplies to the countryside, they could take the option of retreating into self-sufficiency. Rather than sell their food surpluses for cash of diminishing real value, they could eat them instead. In World War I, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Russia, and Turkey all faced the problem that, when war broke out, even if yields were maintained, the harvest share that reached the towns through the market tended to fall away. Since soldiers had to be fed at all costs, the industrial and commercial workers had no choice but to tighten their belts and go hungry. This led to revolution in Russia in 1917 and Berlin and Vienna in 1918.

From being a problem of wartime, food also became an instrument of war. If the enemy's fighting power depended on food, one way to weaken the opposing force was to impose hunger on the enemy population. In World War I, again, Germany

hoped to starve the British Isles into surrender by means of a submarine blockade. Britain, joined by the United States in 1917, hoped to achieve the same by blockading Germany at sea, and by pressure to limit the overland trade of Germany's neutral neighbours.

Their experiences of World War I gave the dictators of the 1930s a heightened sensitivity to the importance of food supplies. Stalin had witnessed at first hand the collapse of the Romanov monarchy in the urban famine that paralysed Petrograd in the spring of 1917. Hitler considered that in 1918 Germany was starved into submission, although its territories were still intact and its armies were undefeated. Each in his own way was determined to ensure that his own regime would survive if such circumstances were repeated in the future.

Lizzie Collingham shows that, although similarly motivated, Hitler and Stalin travelled in opposite directions. Stalin built a vast repressive apparatus within his own country to take control over food away from the individual peasant farmers. He used this control to stabilize his system of rule and support his plans for industrial and urban growth. Through the thirties, he monitored frequent reports on worker dissatisfaction across the country and transferred food reserves to one town after another as required to keep discontent within limits. Soviet workers were hungry, but never so hungry as to threaten his rule. Soviet peasants starved in millions, but without political effect.

Hitler, in contrast, determined to control Germany's food supply in a different way: by conquest of the agricultural territories to the East. Here was the "living space" to which ethnic Germans were entitled. It was a problem that this was the same territory, settled by Russians and Ukrainians, that was now feeding Stalin's new cities. Collingham describes how German plans matured into a monstrous project to starve out northern Russia and depopulate the entire region. The remaining labourers, working the land under German overlords, would then feed Berlin instead of Kiev and Moscow.

Collingham describes the imperial projects that developed on similar lines in Rome and Tokyo. Their own farmers were not productive enough to feed the rising urban population, and not efficient enough to survive a growing import trade. Japan aimed to settle its surplus farmers in Manchuria, in the hope that this would both relieve rural tensions at home and increase the supply of food to the homeland. Italy expected to do the same in Ethiopia and Libya.

In this way, food became more than a problem in economic mobilization, and more than an instrument of warfare. The political leaders' backward induction from the fear of hunger and the anticipation of blockade turned food into a purpose of war and one of the chief drivers of their strategies that led to World War II.

In addressing this theme, Lizzie Collingham has written a remarkable and absorbing book. *The Taste of War* is global in scope, taking in all theatres, most powers, and their colonial and conquered regions. This makes it a risky venture. Safe books stick to repeating what is already generally accepted, or exploring some narrow theme that few will follow and fewer will care about. In contrast, *The Taste of War* crosses boundaries and disregards established ways of looking at history. The potential gain from taking such risks is the integrating insights that cannot arise in any other way. So, this is a brave venture, too.

Most important, it succeeds. *The Taste of War* is a terrific achievement. What are the integrating insights that arise? First, Collingham shows how the fear of food insecurity was a common factor in the war plans of the dictators. Then, she discusses how war distributed hunger. Everywhere the war disrupted trade and forced the regions of the world into self-sufficiency. A fortunate zone spread westward across the Atlantic from the British Isles to the Americas and beyond into the southeastern Pacific, ending in Australia. Here, food loomed large in the perceptions of people and governments, and there were shortages by peacetime standards, but many ate well and nobody starved. Americans had more guns and less butter but, as Hugh Rockoff has pointed out, at the same time they also had more ice cream. Elsewhere, war mobilization under conditions of wartime self-sufficiency brought generalized hunger, frequently tipping over into famine.

Deaths mainly or wholly from hunger occurred at various times in Tanganyika (p. 136), Netherlands (22, 000, p. 177), Kiev (150,000, p. 199), Greece (half a million, p. 168), Leningrad (one million, p. 195), the Japanese armed forces (one million, p. 303), Vietnam (1 to 2 million, p. 241), the Soviet interior (another 1 to 2 million, p. 317), Bengal (1.5 to 3 million, p. 142), among Soviet prisoners of war held by Germany (2 million, p. 194), and in China (15 million p. 257). And this is far from a complete account. In total, hunger killed more civilians than combat killed soldiers (p. 1).

There were different kinds of famine. On territory held by the Allies, famine arose in a context of local difficulties that would have had minor effects in peacetime. Harvest shortfalls interacted with wartime pressures, government negligence, and the efforts of neighbouring authorities to protect themselves, so that stocks were withheld while borders and markets were closed, with fatal results.

Elsewhere famine arose by design. The German plans for the occupation of the Soviet Union anticipated 30 million deaths from the starvation necessary to divert sufficient food to Germany. It was a problem for the occupation authorities in Poland and the Ukraine that people did not die fast enough but lingered, continuing to survive on what they could beg, barter, scrounge, or steal (p. 214). As a result, food was consumed by the occupied people that should have been put to one side for Germany or eaten by Germans. The killing of Jews was industrialized and

accelerated, in part, to reduce the amount of food they would otherwise consume before death (pp. 209-211).

The war was followed by a global food shortage, so that the number of hunger victims continued to rise even after the war ended. Only now did Germans encounter the threat of real starvation, for which they tended to blame the occupation authorities, unaware of the extent to which they had previously benefited from the hunger of others (p. 467).

Collingham concludes with the war's legacies. She discusses how the war medicalized nutrition while impoverishing diets in many countries. She connects the latter with the global "obesity epidemic." The spread of obesity is surely troubling, but this trend appears to be so deep rooted and well established that it is hard now to see events two generations distant in the past as either causal or even significantly disturbing.

The experience of the war is also relevant to modern concerns about food security. Collingham believes that our children will live in an increasingly unequal and hungry world; we should pay more attention, therefore, to food security. But the evidence of her own book is that it was precisely when food security took priority that people starved, because markets were broken up and borders were closed to the free movement of people and food.

The Taste of War shows that food security was one of the most destructive ideas of the twentieth century. Political peddlers bundled utopian dreams of agrarian self-sufficiency with xenophobic fears about dependence on trading partners to sell the case for war to the public. Food security was the pretext for national policies that ended in conquest, genocidal famines, and mass murder. If we wish to live in a world free of famine, therefore, we should do all we can to promote free trade and the free movement of people and goods.