
The Politics of Hunger: A Review

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States throughout history have persisted in severely encumbering and even prohibiting international trade. Seldom, however, can the consequences of such an effort—the obvious immediate results as well as the likely long-range ones—have been as devastating as in the case of the Allied (really, British) naval blockade of Germany in the First World War. This hunger blockade belongs to the category of forgotten state atrocities of the twentieth century. (Similarly, who now remembers the tens of thousands of Biafrans starved to death during the war of independence through the policy of the Nigerian generals supported by the British government?) Thus, C. Paul Vincent, a trained historian and currently library director at Keene State College in New Hampshire, deserves our gratitude for recalling it to memory in this scholarly and balanced study.

Vincent tellingly recreates the atmosphere of jubilation that surrounded the outbreak of the war that was truly the fateful watershed of the twentieth century. While Germans were overcome by an almost mystical sense of community (the economist Emil Lederer declared that now *Gesellschaft* [Society] had been transformed into *Gemeinschaft* [Community]), the British gave themselves over to their own patented form of cant. The socialist and positivist-utopian H.G. Wells, for instance, gushed: “I find myself enthusiastic for this war against Prussian militarism. . . . Every sword that is drawn against Germany is a sword drawn for peace.” Wells later coined the mendacious slogan, “the war to end war.” As the conflict continued, the state-socialist current that had been building for decades overflowed into massive government intrusions into every facet of civil society, especially the economy. The German *Kriegssozialismus* that became a model for the Bolsheviks on their assumption of power is well known, but, as Vincent points out: “the British achieved control over their economy unequaled by any of the other belligerent states.”

Everywhere state seizure of social power was accompanied and fostered by propaganda drives unparalleled in history to that time. In this respect, the

British were very much more successful than the Germans, and their masterly portrayal of the “Huns” as the diabolical enemies of civilization, perpetrators of every imaginable sort of “frightfulness,”¹ served to mask the single worst example of barbarism in the whole war, aside from the Armenian massacres. This was what Lord Devlin frankly calls “the starvation policy” directed against the civilians of the Central Powers (particularly Germany),² the plan that aimed, as Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty in 1914 and one of the framers of the scheme, admitted, to “starve the whole population—men, women, and children, old and young, wounded and sound—into submission.”³

The British policy was in contravention of international law on two major points.⁴ First, in regard to the character of the blockade, it violated the Declaration of Paris of 1856, which Britain itself had signed, and which, among other things, permitted “close” but not “distant” blockades. A belligerent was allowed to station ships near the three-mile limit to stop traffic with an enemy’s ports; it was not allowed simply to declare areas of the high seas comprising the approaches to the enemy’s coast to be off-limits. This is what Britain did on November 3, 1914, when it announced, allegedly in response to the discovery of a German ship unloading mines off the English coast, that henceforth the whole of the North Sea was a military area, which would be mined and into which neutral ships proceeded “at their own peril.” Similar measures in regard to the English Channel insured that neutral ships would be forced to put into British ports for sailing instructions or to take on British pilots. During this time they could easily be searched, obviating the requirement of searching them on the high seas.

This introduces the second and even more complex question: that of contraband. Briefly, following the lead of the Hague Conference of 1907, the Declaration of London of 1909 considered food to be “conditional contraband,” that is, subject to interception and capture only when intended for the use of the enemy’s military forces. This was part of the painstaking effort, extending over generations, to strip war of its most savage aspects by establishing a sharp distinction between combatants and noncombatants. Among the corollaries of this was that food not intended for military use could legitimately be transported to a neutral port, even if it ultimately found its way to the enemy’s territory. The House of Lords had refused its consent to the Declaration of London, which did not, consequently, come into full force. Still, as the U.S. government pointed out to the British at the start of the war, the Declaration’s provisions were in keeping “with the generally recognized principles of international law.” As an indication of this, the British admiralty had incorporated the Declaration into its manuals.

The British quickly began to tighten the noose around Germany by unilaterally expanding the list of contraband and by putting pressure on neutrals (particularly the Netherlands, since Rotterdam more than any other port was the focus of British concerns over the provisioning of the Germans) to acquiesce

in its violations of the rules. In the case of the major neutral, the United States, no pressure was needed. With the exception of the beleaguered Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, who resigned in 1915, the American leaders were amazingly sympathetic to the British point of view. For example, after listening to complaints from the Austrian ambassador on the illegality of the British blockade, Colonel House, Wilson's intimate advisor on foreign affairs, noted in his diary: "He forgets to add that England is not exercising her power in an objectionable way, for it is controlled by a democracy."⁵

The Germans responded to the British attempt to starve them into submission by declaring the seas around the British Isles a "war zone." Now the British openly announced their intention of impounding any and all goods originating in or bound for Germany. Although the British measures were lent the air of reprisals for German actions, in reality the great plan was hatched and pursued independently of anything the enemy did or refrained from doing:

The War Orders given by the Admiralty on 26 August [1914] were clear enough. All food consigned to Germany through neutral ports was to be captured and all food consigned to Rotterdam was to be presumed consigned to Germany. . . . The British were determined on the starvation policy, whether or not it was lawful.⁶

The effects of the blockade were soon being felt by the German civilians. In June 1915, bread began to be rationed. "By 1916," Vincent states, "the German population was surviving on a meager diet of dark bread, slices of sausage without fat, an individual ration of three pounds of potatoes per week, and turnips," and that year the potato crop failed. The author's choice of telling quotations from eye witnesses helps to bring home to the reader the reality of a famine such as had not been experienced in Europe outside of Russia since Ireland's travail in the 1840s. As one German put it: "Soon the women who stood in the pallid queues before shops spoke more about their children's hunger than about the death of their husbands." An American correspondent in Berlin wrote:

Once I set out for the purpose of finding in these food-lines a face that did not show the ravages of hunger. . . . Four long lines were inspected with the closest scrutiny. But among the 300 applicants for food there was not one who had had enough to eat for weeks. In the case of the youngest women and children the skin was drawn hard to the bones and bloodless. Eyes had fallen deeper into the sockets. From the lips all color was gone, and the tufts of hair which fell over the parchmented faces seemed dull and famished—a sign that the nervous vigor of the body was departing with the physical strength.

Vincent places the German decision in early 1917 to resume and expand submarine warfare against merchant shipping—which provided the Wilson

administration with its final pretext for entering the war—in the framework of collapsing German morale. The German U-boat campaign proved unsuccessful and, in fact, by bringing the United States into the conflict, aggravated the famine. “Wilson ensured that every loophole left open by the Allies for the potential reprovisioning of Germany was closed . . . even the importation of foodstuffs by neutrals was prevented until December 1917.” Rations in Germany were reduced to about one thousand calories a day. By 1918, the mortality rate among civilians was 38 percent higher than in 1913; tuberculosis was rampant, and, among children, so were rickets and edema. Yet, when the Germans surrendered in November 1918, the armistice terms, drawn up by Clemenceau, Foch, and Pétain, included the continuation of the blockade until a final peace treaty was ratified. In December 1918, the National Health Office in Berlin calculated that 763,000 persons had died as a result of the blockade by that time; the number added to this in the first months of 1919 is unknown.⁷ In some respects, the armistice saw the intensification of the suffering, since the German Baltic coast was now effectively blockaded and German fishing rights in the Baltic annulled.

One of the most notable points in Vincent’s account is how the perspective of “zoological” warfare, later associated with the Nazis, began to emerge from the maelstrom of ethnic hatred engendered by the war. In September 1918, one English journalist, in an article titled “The Huns of 1940,” wrote hopefully of the tens of thousands of Germans now in the wombs of famished mothers who “are destined for a life of physical inferiority.”⁸ The “famous founder of the Boy Scouts, Robert Baden-Powell, naively expressed his satisfaction that the German race is being ruined; though the birth rate, from the German point of view, may look satisfactory, the irreparable harm done is quite different and much more serious.”

Against the genocidal wish-fantasies of such thinkers and the heartless vindictiveness of Entente politicians should be set the anguished reports from Germany by British journalists and, especially, army officers, as well as by the members of Herbert Hoover’s American Relief Commission. Again and again they stressed, besides the barbarism of the continued blockade, the danger that famine might well drive the Germans to Bolshevism. Hoover was soon persuaded of the urgent need to end the blockade, but wrangling among the Allies, particularly French insistence that the German gold stock could not be used to pay for food, since it was earmarked for reparations, prevented action. In early March 1919, General Herbert Plumer, commander of the British Army of Occupation, informed Prime Minister Lloyd George that his men were begging to be sent home; they could no longer stand the sight of “hordes of skinny and bloated children pawing over the offal” from the British camps. Finally, the Americans and British overpowered French objections, and at the end of March, the first food shipments began arriving in Hamburg. But it was only in

July, after the formal German signature to the Treaty of Versailles, that the Germans were permitted to import raw materials and export manufactured goods.

Besides the direct effects of the British blockade, there are the possible indirect and much more damaging effects to consider. A German child who was ten years old in 1918, and who survived, was twenty-two in 1930. Vincent raises the question of whether the miseries and suffering from hunger in the early, formative years help account to some degree for the enthusiasm of German youth for Nazism later on. Drawing on a 1971 article by Peter Loewenberg, he argues in the affirmative.⁹ Loewenberg's work, however, is a specimen of psychohistory and his conclusions are explicitly founded on psychoanalytic doctrine. Although Vincent does not endorse them unreservedly, he leans toward explaining the later behavior of the generation of German children scarred by the war years in terms of an emotional or nervous impairment of rational thought. Thus, he refers to "the ominous amalgamation of twisted emotion and physical degradation, which was to presage considerable misery for Germany and the world" and which was produced in large part by the starvation policy. But is such an approach necessary? It seems perfectly plausible to seek for the mediating connections between exposure to starvation (and the other torments caused by the blockade) and later fanatical and brutal behavior in commonly intelligible (though, of course, not thereby justifiable) human attitudes generated by the early experiences. These attitudes would include hatred, deep-seated bitterness and resentment, and a disregard for the value of life of "others"—because the value of one's "own" life had been so ruthlessly disregarded. A starting point for such an analysis could be Theodore Abel's 1938 work, *Why Hitler Came to Power: An Answer Based on the Original Life Stories of Six Hundred of His Followers*. Loewenberg's conclusion after studying this work that "the most striking emotional affect expressed in the Abel autobiographies are the adult memories of intense hunger and privation from childhood."¹⁰ An interpretation that would accord the hunger blockade its proper place in the setting for the rise of Nazi savagery has no particular need for a psychoanalytical or physiological underpinning.

Occasionally Vincent's views on issues marginal to his theme are distressingly stereotyped: he appears to accept an extreme Fischer-school interpretation of guilt for the origin of the war as adhering to the German government alone, and, concerning the fortunes of the Weimar Republic, he states: "That Germany lost this opportunity is one of the tragedies of the twentieth century. . . . Too often the old socialists seemed almost terrified of socialization." The cliché that, if only heavy industry had been socialized in 1919, then German democracy could have been saved, was never very convincing.¹¹ It is proving less so as research begins to suggest that it was precisely the Weimar system of massive state intervention in the labor markets and the advanced welfare-state institutions (the most "progressive" of their time) that so weakened the

German economy that it collapsed in the face of the Great Depression.¹² This collapse, particularly the staggering unemployment that accompanied it, has long been considered by scholars to have been a major cause of the Nazi rise to power in 1930–33.

These are, however, negligible points in view of the service Vincent has performed both in reclaiming from oblivion past victims of a murderous state policy and in deepening our understanding of twentieth-century European history. There has recently occurred in the Federal Republic of Germany a “fight of historians” over whether the Nazi slaughter of the European Jews should be viewed as “unique” or placed within the context of other mass murders, specifically the Stalinist atrocities against the Ukrainian peasantry.¹³ Vincent’s work suggests the possibility that the framework of the discussion ought to be widened more than any of the participants has so far proposed.

Notes

1. Cf. H.C. Peterson, *Propaganda for War. The Campaign against American Neutrality, 1914–1917* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), especially pp. 51–70, on propaganda regarding German “atrocities.”

2. Patrick Devlin, *Too Proud to Fight: Woodrow Wilson’s Neutrality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 193–198.

3. Cited in Peterson, *Propaganda*, p. 83.

4. Cf. Devlin, *Too Proud to Fight*, pp. 158–67, 191–200; and Thomas A. Bailey and Paul B. Ryan, *The Lusitania Disaster: An Episode in Modern Warfare and Diplomacy* (New York: Free Press, 1975), pp. 27–33.

5. Cited in Walter Millis, *Road to War: America, 1914–1917* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), p. 84. The U.S. government’s bias in favor of the Allied cause is well documented. Thus, even such an “establishment” diplomatic historian as the late Thomas A. Bailey, in his *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 9th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 572, states: “The obvious explanation of America’s surprising docility [in the face of British violations of neutrals’ rights] is that the Wilson administration was sympathetic with the Allies from the beginning.” The partisanship of Wilson, his advisor Colonel House, Secretary of State Robert Lansing, and, especially, the American ambassador to England, Walter Hines Page, is highlighted in Bailey’s even-handed account of the entry of the United States into the war (pp. 562–95). The reader may find it an interesting exercise to compare Bailey’s treatment with that from a newer generation of “establishment” authority, Robert H. Ferrell, *American Diplomacy: A History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 1975), pp. 456–74. Ferrell gives no hint of the administration’s bias toward Britain. Of the notorious British propaganda document luridly detailing the nonexistent German atrocities in Belgium, he writes: “It is true that in the light of postwar investigation the veracity of some of the deeds instanced in the Bryce Report has come into question” (p. 462). (On the Bryce Report, see Peterson, *Propaganda*, pp. 53–58, and Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975], pp. 83–84.)

Ferrell's account could itself pass muster as somewhat refined Entente propaganda. Lest American college students miss the moral of his story, he ends with the assertion: "It was certainly in the interest of national security to go to war . . . logic demanded entrance."

6. Devlin, *Too Proud to Fight*, pp. 193, 195.

7. The British historian Arthur Bryant, writing in 1940, put the figure even higher, at 800,000 for the last two years of the blockade, "about fifty times more than were drowned by submarine attacks on British shipping." Cited in J.F.C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War, 1789–1961* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961), p. 178.

8. F.W. Wile, "The Huns of 1940," *Weekly Dispatch*, September 8, 1918. Vincent notes that he is citing the article from a book published in Stuttgart in 1940.

9. Peter Loewenberg, "The Psychohistorical Origins of the Nazi Youth Cohorts," *American Historical Review* 76, no. 5 (December 1971): 1457–502. Loewenberg writes, for instance:

The war and postwar experiences of the small children and youth of World War I explicitly conditioned the nature and success of National Socialism. The new adults who became politically effective after 1929 and who filled the ranks of the SA and the other paramilitary party organizations . . . were the children socialized in the First World War. (1458)

10. *Ibid.*, 1499.

11. The leading advocate of socialization in Germany after the war was Emil Lederer, whose remarks about *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* were cited previously. He denied, however, that the socialized economy would be more productive than capitalism. See Karl Pribram, *A History of Economic Reasoning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 382.

12. The recent debate among German economic historians on this question is discussed in Jürgen von Kruedener, "Die Überforderung der Weimarer Republik als Sozialstaat," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 11, no. 3 (1985): 358–76.

13. *Historiker-"Streit."* *Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (Munich: Piper, 1987).