Food Will Win the War

WWI Posters from the U.S. Food Administration

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Exhibition captions:

When the United States entered WWI in 1917, the United States Food Administration came into existence to meet the demands of the Allies on American food supplies. This was despite the depleted stocks and near panic level prices of grain.

“The success of the Food Administration in reducing waste of food which could go toward export is demonstrated by the vast increase in tonnage sent to Europe. The average tons exported in the three years preceding the war was 6,959,055, which increased to 12,326,914 tons in 1917, and by the end of 1919 had increased again to 18,667,378 tons.”


In the first year of U.S. involvement in WWI, “there was an urgent need to restrict consumption in the United States itself, inasmuch as no substantial increase in production could be hoped for until the 1918 harvest.” Posters such as the ones here helped garner
support for the restriction of consumption, for the United States Food Administration had little power to enforce policy.

According to Herbert Hoover, the most astounding aspect of the response to the Food Administration during WWI was “the giving of the huge amount of supplies during WWI was, in a considerable part, charity.” Hotels, restaurants, dining cars, clubs, and other public eating places alone saved, by observance of Food Administration policy, over 250,000,000 pounds of wheat, 300,000,000 pounds of meat, and hundreds of millions of pounds of sugar. All this was done voluntarily, responding to calls made by the Food Administration media campaign, represented by these posters on exhibit.


The outpouring of private support demonstrates the power of the Food Administration’s media campaign. “Twenty Million dollars’ worth of advertising space, all of it given freely to the administration, was used in the cause of food economy.” These posters occupied the space voluntarily given. Over thirteen million households signed pledges binding themselves to carry out the requests of the administration for meatless and wheatless days.


The huge undertaking during WWI of providing food aid was daunting. Hoover wrote, “the entire process requires billions of dollars in money, the purchase of scores of millions of tons of supplies from overseas, the management of enormous fleets of cargo ships, and, at times, the taking over and managing of railways, waterways, and coal mines in areas of economic chaos.”


“Owing to the commandeering of deep-sea fishing trawlers and crews by the Navy, more than one-half of our fish supply was cut off and this was bound to increase our domestic consumption of other primary commodities. To remedy this, agreements were entered upon with all the seaboard states suspending the restrictions on fishing within bays and the three-mile limit, and organized stimulation was given to coast fishing. A large
amount of propaganda was initiated to secure substitution in consumption of littoral for deep-sea fishes.”


“The Food Administration was created by Executive Order on August 10, 1917. The plan of organization adopted was to assemble, so far as possible, the voluntary service of individuals in administrative work and the voluntary co-operation of the householders, the farmers, and the food trades.”


Mr. Hoover, who headed the administration, “declared that he would rely on the voluntary effort of the people and of the great trades, on the ‘spirit of self-denial and self sacrifice.’” It is clear from examples presented here that the victory of the United States in the war closely connected not only to the volunteerism of Americans, but also the alleviation of starvation in Europe.


“It was obviously fundamental to the entire program of the Food Administration that the public should be kept advised of the facts which determined that program as well as the exact terms of the requests and directions for its achievement. This could be best and most directly accomplished through the one great agency for disseminating information, the press of this country.” Newspaper articles thinly disguising pieces of propaganda on view are.


Because of the huge need of food, “the women of the United States were asked to register for actual membership in the Food Administration. They were told that a single pound of bread saved weekly by each person would increase our export surplus 100,000,000 bushels and an average saving per meal of two cents a day by each person would save two billion dollars for war purposes.” On view are examples of postcards and pamphlets that persuaded women to follow the policy of saving.
Although most of the pressure applied by the Food Administration was through cartoons and pamphlets such as these, there were on occasions some legal applications of the Food Administrations power. “Flagrant cases of profiteering and hoarding were prosecuted by or upon instructions from the Enforcement Division… All together, 8,800 cases were handled by the Enforcement Division at Washington in which some penalty was inflicted.”


The Food Administrations full time staff was quite small compared to the voluntary addition. “All together, some 8,000 volunteers gave their entire time to the Administration. Some 3,000 persons, chiefly clerical assistants, were employed at salaries, and it is estimated that part-time service was given by 750,000 members of committees, principally women.”


“The duty of stimulating production was naturally assigned to the Department of Agriculture. Whose great service and abilities cannot be overestimated. The activities of the Department had necessarily to take the form of advice and patriotic appeal to farmers; and in the latter the Food Administration also joined, through its large voluntary organization.”


In the half-century after 1914, “American organizations-voluntary and governmental-have provided the margins of food, medicines, and clothing which saved the lives of 1,400,000,000 human beings.” The United States Food Administration, founded by Herbert Hoover during WWI, saved 800,000,000 of those lives. These kinds of posters were some of the most important tools with which the administration achieved such a high number.

Partly due to posters such as these “a total of 6,781,317.6 metric tons of foodstuffs were furnished to France during the period from April, 1917, to the middle of 1919.” All sectors of society were encouraged to consume less and produce more.


Adolphe Treidler, the artist responsible for the painting of this poster, “was instrumental in the development of American commercial art. Treidler produced prints of urban life and one of his favorite themes was the construction of the city.


Early in the evolution of what would become the United States Food Administration, Herbert Hoover helped organize an international commission at the very beginning of WWI to try and convince both the British and Germans to allow $100,000 of food for the starving people of Brussels on behalf of the Belgian government. Hoover at the same time was using a huge amount of his personal fortune to help some 120,000 American tourists in their flight from Europe.


“The duty of the Food Administration fell into two parts: first, to organize the service and self-denial of the American people so as to supply the Allies with foodstuffs during the war and all Europe after the Armistice; second, to control, so far as its authority extended, the distribution of foodstuffs at home and to limit speculation in them.”


“During the three years prior to our entry into the war Europe had mobilized 60,000,000 men from production to armies and munitions—nearly one-third of the theoretical labor
strength of all states in conflict.” Despite a huge number of women augmenting the workforce, “a steady decrease in their food production was inevitable from the beginning.”