

Hand Book

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The Commission for Relief

in Belgium

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The Commission for Relief in Belgium

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**The Commission for
Relief in Belgium**

71 Broadway, New York

American Commission for Relief in Belgium
Spanish Commission for Relief in Belgium
Italian Commission for Relief in Belgium
Comite National de Secours et D'Alimentation

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Purpose and Organization

PICTURE to yourself the American Embassy, London. Time: the early stages of the greatest military struggle the world has seen. A group of men in audience before Dr. Page, the American Ambassador. On one side, a knot of the leading citizens of Belgium, granted temporary leave of absence by the German Military Authorities—on the other a few American business and professional men.

The American Ambassador states: "Gentlemen: I am gratified to inform you that an understanding has been reached with all the belligerent Powers by which the importation of foodstuffs to the civil population of Belgium will be permitted, provided the importation of these foodstuffs through the belligerent lines and their ultimate distribution is under the control and responsibility of the diplomatic representatives of the American Government. This is a problem of saving seven million people, of which five millions are women and children. The work of diplomacy is now complete. In order that this great task may be successfully carried out, it is necessary to have one, and only one, organization, under one control, which will be responsible for the preservation of the benevolent neutrality of my country. I have called you American gentlemen here because we are prepared to trust you with our responsibilities, and, further than that, I believe you are capable of carrying out this, the most gigantic work of philanthropy with which my countrymen have ever been entrusted. This is a big man's job. Can you do it? Gentlemen, I bid you godspeed."

The American contingent addressed the Belgian representatives:

"How much food do you require? When do you want it?"

The Belgians replied: "We shall require each month a minimum of 25,000,000 francs' worth of food, allowing but one-third of a soldier's ration to each of the 7,000,000 people. We need this food at once. Belgium is prostrate. It has no consequential resources available. We are prepared to pledge our credit and everything that we possess. The Belgians are suffer-

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ing from the lack of bread to-day; to-morrow they will be starving. They are without resources other than credit and courage. Owing to the denial of responsibility, no help can be expected from the clashing Powers. The whole of the Belgian people are in imminent peril of extinction. If Belgium can but retain its population alive, it will begin again. Military opinion has practically decreed the form of this civil population.

The Americans answered: "Knowing that this situation as presented by you will appeal to the sympathies of the most benevolent nation in the world, we have no hesitation in saying that we will feed Belgium, and as food is required at once, we think it would be desirable to visit the Baltic Exchange this afternoon and buy a million dollars worth in anticipation."

It was in this informal manner that the American Commission for Relief in Belgium was initiated. The next day—the 22nd of October—a meeting at which eight men were present, formed an organization, whose purpose was defined in fourteen typewritten lines, with the following object: "To carry into execution the engagement undertaken by the American Ambassadors in London and Brussels with regard to provisioning the people of Belgium." These are the first and last minutes of the organization. Since the original meeting no time has been wasted in formalities of such a character.

With this simple directness the most gigantic relief undertaking that the world has ever seen was inaugurated by men accustomed to conduct big affairs. They applied to this task the same efficiency that governs the control of their own enterprises, and within a time measured by days, not years, the organization sprang into being.

The sole capital of the Commission for Relief in Belgium at the beginning was the personality and business prestige of its members, and behind all this an abiding faith in the goodness of the American people. Its members did not probably realize the colossal nature of the task confronting them. To-day every obstacle has been overcome, and the machinery of the organization works as smoothly as that of any great and efficient commercial corporation.

In the words of Ambassador Page in a recent address, the Commission has reached the stage where the volume of its transactions exceeds that of any other food business in the

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world. The amount of its transportation is surpassed in magnitude by but few shipping aggregations. Its weekly balance sheet—a unique feature in philanthropic organization—shows that its operating costs are less than 2 per cent of its turnover, and even these operating costs are provided for by a special fund. It deals directly in its own name with the greatest governments in the world. It furnishes the link of transportation and distribution from the farmer in Kansas to the humblest peasant in Belgium.

The Commission has undertaken a task as big as that confronting the commissariat of the German Army, with the added difficulty that it must beg the money to purchase the supplies. Its lines of communication are over 3,000 miles of ocean, through the frontiers of at least three hostile nations with all the attendant disruption of transport and the irritating delays which this entails. Even after the cargoes from America have reached Rotterdam, the difficulties of transport have only begun. All the normal routes in Belgium by rail and road are in constant use by the German Military Authorities, and can only be used subject to disastrous delays. The network of Belgian canals constitute the only route by which a safe and certain transport can be maintained. In the early days of German occupation these canals were abandoned and, in many places, destroyed. It has been necessary for the Commission to map and explore the entire canal system, to clear the wreckage and arrange with the local Communes to remove obstructions. As the Belgian people are restricted in travel to the immediate environment of their own homes, the pioneers of the Commission were obliged to grope their way in practical darkness through a country whose every industrial activity has been brought to a full stop. In the ordinary course of peaceful trade there is no great difficulty, provided the money is available, in buying ten million dollars' worth of food, and with a wave of the hand summoning the ships to carry it to any port in the world. In a period of war that is almost universal, when the money must be begged or raised by loans or Government subsidies, when every single institution or Committee engaged in Belgian relief must be pressed to do its utmost and induced to bury its personal ambitions—then the question of providing that amount of food becomes, from hour to hour, more often than not a crisis that involves going to the bank and asking for personal credit to finance the Commission's activities.

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Neutral shipping in sufficient volume is unobtainable; belligerent ships that may be employed are open to capture and destruction. Special agreements must be obtained with Governments to protect these ships and the neutrality of the Commission's flag, as distinguished from the nationality of the ship, has had to be established. Owners have had to be induced to traverse the mine-fields of the North Sea, and pleaded and begged with in the name of charity to take the risk of the voyage. Government insurance, instituted to prevent panic, is not available; insurers must be persuaded that they are acting for humanity's sake and not for their pockets.

This is the one undertaking upon which all of the belligerent Powers have looked with approval and to which in a large measure they have given their active support. It is the one organization where the Executive heads are able to discuss its affairs direct, face to face with Cabinet Ministers of the warring Powers. *It is the quintessence of neutrality, in that it has the respect and recognition of all Governments.* The work of this Commission has given an outlet for the keen desire of many Americans to be of service in connection with the work of salving the wreckage produced by this titanic struggle.

When asked whether or not the feeding of the Belgians was the duty of the Germans or the duty of the Allies, the Commission has responded that it does not propose to enter upon these arguments. What they do know is that neither of these warring factions have fed, nor, so far as they can find out, intend to feed the Belgians, and while the moral responsibility of either of them is being determined, the Belgians will starve. As Americans, whose quality of mind is, if anything, one of directness to the ultimate issue, they maintain there is no time to delay with argument. At this moment, surrounded by a ring of steel, one and a half million people are on the bread-line, and no household in Belgium has bread unless the Commission supply it.

Scope of the Organization

HERE are no secrets in the Commission's business. It is conducted with open doors and open desks. Its accounts and all its transactions are open to the public. Its important correspondence is conducted in rooms within hearing of dozens of ears. Its telegrams are sent without fear of censorship. The Commission rooms are visited by the Diplomatic Representatives of the Governments. Men are assigned from the various Governments concerned to look after and facilitate the multitudinous relations which the Commission has with Government Departments. Every Government concerned has been invited to place an attache of the Government in that particular office, and some have availed themselves of this.

In addition to feeding the Belgians, the Commission has one other ideal which the Chairman recently defined as follows:

"Having in front of us what we believe to be the largest problem ever undertaken by way of relief, and this problem having been entrusted to the American business and professional man, we have felt that it was up to us to demonstrate that business could be applied to philanthropy in our hands with such an efficiency and integrity that it shall be a creditable monument in our national history."

The first mission coming out of Belgium with a cry for help was headed by Mr. Millard Shaler, who came to London with an order from the local Brussels Relief Committee to try and buy and secure the importation of about 2,000 tons of foodstuffs, at a cost of approximately \$100,000. The response to this modest appeal is indicated by the fact that to-day the Commission have at the end of the year forty-three cargo ships in their service, carrying, or chartered to load, thirteen million dollars worth of food. The amount asked by M. Shaler's mission comprises now the task of the Commission for less than one day.

From long experience in the organization and management of big business, it was apparent that this was not the type of enterprise to be controlled by an unwieldy committee, and it was determined that the business executive of this growing concern

must be controlled by a small body of men. In work of this order it would be utterly impossible to carry on the business details if it was to be dependent upon volunteers, no matter how efficient, who had other affairs of dominating interest. It was necessary that the members of the executive should be accustomed to the direction of large enterprises and should possess the spirit of self-sacrifice in full measure. The operations are therefore controlled by an Executive Committee of some twenty men, who have abandoned their normal businesses and professions as if they were forgotten, and who sit in constant attendance, days, nights and Sundays, in the Commission's offices in London, New York, Rotterdam and Brussels. In addition to this there are some fifty volunteer workers, pledged for longer or shorter periods, filling branch offices in America, Holland and Belgium, and over 150 persons in subordinate positions. The food and shipping business is, as may be imagined, of large dimensions. Six great shipping and food firms have been pressed into a service which they render cheerfully, and entirely free of charge. They have equipped each branch with the necessary staff to conduct this specialized work, and this without cost, even for salaries. These employees have been chosen from the best which these great specialist firms possess; in fact one of the most gratifying features of this work has been the fact that the men had only to select, and no matter what their occupation or the prominence of their position might be, they have come cheerfully without thought as to the cost of their own personal sacrifice.

The shipping department has as its object a continuous stream of ships in ever increasing number, and as an example of their activity, it is to be noted that whereas the first meeting of the Commission took place on October 22nd, the first barges bearing foodstuffs crossed the Dutch frontier into Belgium on the 2nd of November, and before that month was completed over 26,000 tons had been delivered unmolested to the distributing centers of that stricken country. Now the pre-determined minimum of 20,000 tons per week is being delivered. Every ship bearing complete Commission cargoes carries a large white flag bearing the words in red:

“The Commission for Relief in Belgium.”

The Captain's papers include a certificate which frees the ship from search by all belligerent Governments. Every barge that

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goes down the canals into Belgium carries this same flag and this same right. Every barge is numbered, and its progress from point to point is registered, and its arrival and departure at each town is reported with the regularity of a great railway system.

The former palace of an old-time Dutch merchant prince in the Haringvliet serves to house the energetic organization which controls the Commission's business in Rotterdam. Here in a few days a great business concern was moving like clockwork with a cosmopolitan staff of Americans, English, Dutch and Belgians. On November 1st the first consignment of about 3,500 tons of flour and various provisions arrived in Rotterdam, enough to provide the Belgian population with but one and a half days' food. The difficulty of getting even this small amount to them, was greater than can be imagined. Rotterdam, even in normal times, is not the natural port of entry into Belgium, and more than one difficulty had to be surmounted. By the time the American ship "Massapequa" from New York arrived on November 21st the organization and the receiving and forwarding arrangements were complete. The ship docked at nine on Saturday evening and before she was made fast 500 stevedores were aboard. By 10 a. m. on Monday her entire cargo had been transferred and the barges and railway trucks containing these provisions were on their way consigned to the distressed provinces. This was easily a record for a seaport famous for the rapidity with which cargoes are handled.

It was on this same occasion that Captain Sunderland, the United States Military Attache at The Hague, accompanied the first food train into Liege, which for some time had been without bread. By the help of the Dutch authorities a special train was chartered as far as the frontier at Eysden and an arrangement had been made with the German military authorities whereby another train was to be in readiness to take food along the German line to Liege. It was necessary to deal with the situation promptly. Liege was starving. The only automobile in Eysden was commandeered and driven into Liege. The train reached Liege and the food was distributed among the hungry population within three hours.

Distribution of Food

WHEN the history of this war is written, there will be no more affecting chapter than that relating to the ever-enduring patience of the Belgian people. Not only did they fail to grumble when food could not reach them as quickly as could be wished, but they scarcely ever reached the point of asking for it. The first actual request that Rotterdam received came from the Liege district. They asked for two tons of salt. This for a population of 50,000. The salt reached them thirty hours after their request was received.

The actual distribution of food is in the hands of the *Comite National de Secours et d'Alimentation*. This Committee was created by the principal business men of Belgium, together with representatives from the various provinces, for the purpose of effecting the equitable distribution of foodstuffs throughout Belgium. The head office of the *Comite* is in Brussels, with Sub-Committees in each of the provinces. These provincial Sub-Committees carry out the details of distribution through the various *Communes*, with definite representative Communal officers. In the case of larger centers, such as Brussels, there is superimposed a municipal Government. The *Communes*, however, maintain their autonomy in local matters. Each Communal Government embraces in normal times a relieving officer and also a medical officer. In the elaboration of the distribution of foodstuffs, advantages has been taken of the Communal organizations, and of the normally existing machinery for relief, by supplementing this machinery by means of volunteer workers to such dimensions as may be necessary in each *Commune*.

The work of the *Comite National de Secours et d'Alimentation* embraces the provisioning of the entire civil population, which from the point of view of organization falls into three classes:

- (a) The absolutely destitute;
- (b) The workpeople of small means;
- (c) The middle and upper classes.

The organization in Brussels, which has been duplicated in

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practically every center throughout the entire country, is as follows:

Each destitute person in the community becomes the subject of special investigation by the Communal officers. If the case warrants, he is given a free non-transferable ticket which entitles him to a definite ration twice daily at the Communal canteens.

The workpeople of small means are required to pay for their tickets; they receive the same ration as the destitute. The actual cost of the rations for which the ticket provides is about 9 francs per month. It consists of 300 grammes of bread, a portion of potatoes, a small amount of coffee, salt and a litre of soup containing vegetables and a lump of meat. The number of canteens in each Commune depends upon the necessities of the district, the food being prepared in Communal kitchens.

Supplementary to the ordinary canteens for adults are those devoted exclusively to the care of children under three years of age. A child receives one of five different kinds of tickets, according to the decision of the Communal doctor, the kind depending upon the age and state of health of the child. These tickets call for a certain proportion of milk, cocoa, and other nourishing food adapted to the child's requirements. Children between three and twelve years of age receive their rations at the schools.

The middle and upper classes are able to purchase food, but as there is no bread in Belgium except that supplied by the Communes, they are compelled to purchase it from that source. Under the present arrangement the Communes sell flour to the bakers, the list of bakers' customers having been approved by the Communal officers, and the amount of bread which the bakers can deliver is fixed. A small profit is secured from the sale of flour, and a further source of income to the Comite arises from the arrangement under which the Communes are compelled to pay to the Comite three francs per month on all tickets issued by the Commune. The money for this payment is obtained by the Commune from the sale of tickets and from other sources. The object of requiring the Communes to pay this amount is to guarantee economy in issuing free tickets.

Method of Work

IT has been a guiding principle of the Commission that the donor of gift food should not be burdened with the cost, and incident worry of attending to freight and shipping arrangements and charges. It is intended that every dollar donated shall be utilized in the purchase of food alone, and every pound of food shall reach the starving Belgians without expense to those who have given it. The Commission has consequently provided a transportation fund, with a nucleus of \$3,000,000 capital, and offers to defray all transportation cost from any railway station or port in the world. This has had the effect of making available for the purchase of food sums that might otherwise have been allocated to freight and transport. This fund has been made available by the generosity of the Belgian bankers and institutions.

The representatives of the great American papers and news agencies were called together, and their help and direction asked in placing the plight of the people in Belgium before the public of the world. All sense of rivalry or personal prestige has been buried by these men, with the same sense of devotion to a great cause which has actuated every other member. No "beats" or newspaper rivalries have entered their minds. Every move has been considered by them with care and devotion, they in turn knowing that the American press, representing in itself the benevolence of the American people, would respond to every suggestion.

The services of the largest and best-known firm of accountants in the world were enlisted to take complete charge of the accounts and to act as cashiers in London and at every administrative branch office. Every week a complete audited statement of receipts and expenditures is issued and is accompanied by statistical tables listing the position of cargoes, whether loading or en route, with detailed statements of their contents, and finally the quantity delivered to each province. This is a unique feature in relief work, and in fact is the apotheosis of business applied to philanthropy.

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Every request for assistance has resulted in enthusiastic cooperation. When the Commission was desperate for immediate delivery of foodstuffs, they asked the dock authorities to move a ship away from a London wharf to allow their ship to come alongside, and as an immediate response the dock was cleared. The Commission's ships were discharged in Rotterdam on Sunday, for the first time in the history of the Netherlands, and all legal ordinances and labor union rules were brushed aside. All of these organizations took a pride in expediting the work, and the enthusiasm extended down to the individual stevedores, who received with great pride the certificate stating that they had served the Commission.

The King and Queen of the Belgians have freely given their patronage and support and have formally announced their gratitude in no uncertain terms. Members of the Commission are granted immediate audience with the Cabinet Ministers of Europe, and recognition by the German military authorities is attested by the provision of special passes allowing members and agents of the Commission the right of free movement in Belgium. To no other institution or individual is this privilege granted. The simple word of honor of the executive members that their mission will be confined to the work of the Commission alone is sufficient to secure this useful concession.

The Commission is absolutely and unqualifiedly the only vehicle through which entrance for food to the people of Belgium can be obtained. An organization desirous of working independently in Belgium was informed by the German military authorities that this one efficient organization was alone employed for the purpose, and that they would undertake to personally guarantee the entire consumption by the German Army of all stores brought in by any independent agency.

If you want to go to Belgium to-day, you can go where you will with the magic wand of the Commission, but you have first to satisfy the Commission that you are going to work for them for a period of months, and to take orders to do any job which is assigned to you, and that you have no other object in life but to feed the Belgians. If you happen to be in Belgium and you are not wanted by the Commission in the country, you will find yourself provided with a pass which directs you to appear

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at each of the stations on the road at a scheduled time based upon the capabilities of a fairly swift automobile.

The Commission has not allowed its object to be diverted. It has just one ultimate end, and that is to provide food for the Belgians remaining in Belgium. With its vast machinery, it has been implored to take on a dozen collateral branches of charitable effort, but its members have stated from the beginning that their task is sufficient, and that other organizations are adequate, that it does not desire to compete in the charitable field.

When the Rhodes scholars at Oxford volunteered for work in Belgium and were about to leave London, they were given a parting word, in these terms:

“When this war is over, the thing that will stand out will not be the number of dead and wounded, but the record of those efforts which went to save life. Therefore you should in your daily service remember that in this duty you have not only a service to render to these people, but that you have a duty to this Commission, and above all you have a duty to your own country. You must forget that the greatest war in history is being waged. You have no interest in it other than the feeding of the Belgian people, and you must school yourselves to a realization that you have to us and to your country a sacred obligation of absolute neutrality in every word and every deed.”

These few words to the Rhodes scholars are the keynote of the Commission's work.

The work of the Commission has not only demonstrated the positive neutrality of the American people, but has contributed to demonstrate that neutrality can have beneficence as well as reticence. In other words, it can be positive as well as negative.

The Commission has but one object, one organization, one management and one responsibility. Nothing has done more to make the benevolent neutrality of the United States a positive force in this appalling war than the work accomplished by the Commission for Relief in Belgium.

An Appeal to America

On Behalf of the Belgium Destitute

I

Seven millions stand
Emaciate, in that ancient Delta-land:—
We here, full-charged with our own
 maimed and dead,
And coiled in throbbing conflicts slow
 and sore,
Can soothe how slight these ails unmerited
Of souls forlorn upon the facing shore!
Where naked, gaunt, in endless band on
 band
Seven million stand.

II

No man can say
To your great country that, with scant
 delay,
You must, perforce, ease them in their
 sore need:
We know that nearer first your duty lies:
But—is it much to ask that you let plead
Your loving-kindness with you—wooing-
 wise—
Albeit that aught you owe and must repay
 No man can say?

—THOMAS HARDY

An Appeal to Americans

By

The Commission for Relief in Belgium

Official Clearing House for All Belgium Relief

We, as Americans, are enlisted for the war to save seven million men, women and children. It is the greatest commissary undertaking in the history of the world, and in the lexicon of America there is no such word as fail.

We Need Food Supplies as Well as Cash

Every penny donated to this Commission goes, without reserve, for the purchase of food. Money donated will be credited to your state, and whenever it can be done advantageously, spent within the borders of your state. We pay the freight from a special fund donated to organization and transportation

Railroads, express companies, post-offices, governors, and state committees are aiding. Our Flotilla of Mercy, comprising thirty-five chartered ships, is constantly carrying food. **But—Our Supplies Are Far Too Short.**

Has Your State Sent a Ship to Belgium?

Is It Planning to Send One?

Is there a committee for Belgium relief in your community?

If there is none, start one under our official sanction.

Are You Helping?

If Not, Send in Your Name Now?

Make out your check or money order, or send cash either to the state committee sanctioned by this Commission or to the New York Headquarters:

The Commission for Relief in Belgium

71 Broadway, New York City, N. Y.

Checks to the Woman's Section should be made out to

Miss Anne Morgan, Treasurer
No. 1 Madison Ave., New York