



## Book Review

# Hunger: How food shaped the course of the First World War.

By Rick Blom

Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2019. 236 pages

Review by Laurie A. Wadsworth

“Food, or rather the lack of it, was one of the things that decided the war’s defining moments.” (p. x). Rick Blom, an experienced journalist with a history background, states this as the premise of a book that highlights the macro- and micro-level effects of food availability in Britain, Germany, and France during World War I (WWI). The complexities of economic and physical access to food presented are similar to the global situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the term *supply chain* entered colloquial use. Over eleven chapters, Blom draws on multiple primary data sources including letters, journals and memoirs, armed forces general orders, and interviews with surviving veterans, as well as reports from personal re-enactment experiences in Belgium. The latter provide an intriguing addition to the factual information from primary sources presented in the book. Blom chose three activities that might provide a deeper understanding of the daily lives of troops. They include sampling Bully Beef Pie at a period restaurant in West

Flanders. The tinned cured meat used in the dish—corned beef—was a central part of rations for WWI soldiers. A second activity took Blom to Passchendaele, where he assisted three cooks in a rebuilt field kitchen, preparing food for battle re-enactors. For the third activity, which took place in Bayernwald, the author spent three days in a restored WWI trench with clothing, supplies, and food rations similar to those available to troops during the war. Blom uses insights from these experiences to add some perspective to challenges of feeding troops on the front lines.

Blom describes foods commonly available, food distribution routes and conveyances, and food shortages for both fighting forces and civilians. This popular history provides an explanation of life in the trenches and on the home fronts highlighting the role food played in quality of life. While engaging, viewing war through a food lens is not a unique approach to discussing food insecurity. Food availability has been studied for past conflicts such as the Crimean War

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(Nightingale, 1858; Soyer, 1857), and the US Civil War (Hertzler, 2004).

The book includes many potentially interesting details of food supplies during WWI, such as quartermaster listings of not only foodstuffs, but also of all supplies. The compartmentalized information presentation leaves the reader to contextualize most of the information. While there is a lack of integration and interpretation of the many sources and types of information, the included facts may open up discussions in which the contextualization of food and conflict might occur. Such topics include ground battles that destroyed farmland, difficulties of food delivery to armies on the move, and troop and civilian morale in the face of food shortages. For example, as the war progressed, food supplies on home fronts in England and Germany became markedly scarce. By 1916, “the German navy sank an average of more than 300,000 tonnes of ships’ stores per month.” (p.107). Losses of imported foods and other supplies added further complexity to food availability. Governments encouraged people to eat less and waste nothing while implementing major restrictions to food procurement. The roots of community gardens, urban farms, and soup kitchens began before the war ended. Negative health impacts surfaced, including malnutrition and starvation. These situations led to strikes, protests, looting, and riots in both nations. Support for the war declined markedly in home countries. Blom reports the similarities between the home fronts and front lines in terms of shortages affecting morale and unrest, but fails to clearly compare and contrast the geographically separated situations.

Most information presented in the book is drawn from primary sources. The use of secondary sources helps put some of the difficulties outlined into the context of past wars. For example, the use of untrained cooks and lower grades of coal in field kitchens, and the

lack of adequate rations for fighting troops, can be compared to situations reported to a Royal Commission on the failures of the British army during the Crimean War. Blom reports that rations for troops provided inadequate energy and nutrients. During training, some British troops gained weight with the meager rations, which points to the poor physical health of malnourished recruits. Similar findings occurred during the Crimean War over 50 years earlier, when troops received insufficient food to maintain a healthy fighting force (Nightingale, 1858). A discussion of whether military commanders had learned from the mistakes of the earlier war might add interest and context for the reader. In this way, the issues faced in WWI can be seen as similar and not unique problems of war.

While Blom presents much detailed information, the text is difficult to read due to phrasing that creates confusion in several places. This may be due to multiple translations, given the many sources of information from several languages that were first translated into Dutch for the 2008 book, which was subsequently translated into English for this current edition. Chapters end with a few errant recipes taken from period army and household cookbooks. While interesting, in some places these seem jarringly out of place, such as when meat-based recipes follow a discussion of the scarcity of the primary ingredient.

Blom’s premise that food shaped the direction and outcome of the war is not fully supported by the information presented. Impacts of the war on food supplies and impacts of food distribution on the war outcome are both presented. These are inextricably intertwined concepts, so it is highly likely that both were part of the progress of WWI. Again, looking at conflict situations through a food lens provides an intriguing way to study the many aspects of war. The detailing of the wider determinants of food supply that

impact past and current conflict situations make this a timely book suitable for audiences interested in food security, armed conflicts, and history. The amassing of solid primary source information may serve as a starting point for further research and academic work, and

academic audiences will find this a valuable resource for the many illustrative points of the far-reaching effects and interconnectedness of food supply chain disruptions.

Laurie Wadsworth is a Senior Research Professor at St. Francis Xavier University. Her current research focuses on the roots of professional dietetics through investigation of food provisioning in hospitals and camps during the Crimean and US Civil wars.

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