

The Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food

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The May/June 2011 issue of *Foreign Policy* magazine was designated 'The Food Issue'. In the lead article, 'The new geopolitics of food', Lester R. Brown writes, 'From the Middle East to Madagascar, high prices are spawning land grabs and ousting dictators. Welcome to the 21st-century food wars'. Lizzie Collingham ends her new book on a similar note: 'The optimistic post-[World War Two] period when food was abundant and cheap appears to be drawing to a close and it seems likely that in the future food will become increasingly scarce and expensive' (p. 501). Indeed, as Lester Brown writes, 'food is the new oil'.

The Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food traces the paths that led from the worldwide agricultural depression in the 1930s, to the Second World War, through to the post-war economic recovery that ended in prosperity and plenty throughout the developed world. It asks what happened when the global food economy of the 1920s and 1930s met the greatest destructive force it has ever come up against, and how the pieces were put back together in the decades after war's end. Collingham's compelling argument about the centrality of food in the Second World War is important and deserves attention for its own sake. Through her interpretation of the role that food played in the lead up to, and the conduct of war, Collingham adds a new dimension to our understanding about the origins of the war and why it unfolded as it did. But the relevance of this long and tragic historical episode – the financially-troubled world economy; the problems of a globalized food system; national isolationist ideologies and protectionist tariffs; the great disparities in wealth and resources between powerful industrial nations and all the rest — and its parallels with our contemporary global competition for access to food and water resources provide an additional reason to look back to the most dramatic episode to date of how food served as a catalyst for world-wide political and military conflict.

It is not without irony that I am writing a review of *The Taste of War*. When I was applying to graduate school to study modern history in the early 1990s with the objective of researching food in the World Wars, the head of one of the history departments that I was considering said flatly that there was no such thing. No history to be written on the subject of food and war? (I received a warm welcome in the history department at another university).

It is not likely that I would get a similar reaction in 2011. Today, food is a legitimate subject of academic inquiry and it is used as a lens or conceptual framework for diverse analyses in history and the social

sciences. Political history is not hegemonic, social and cultural history are here for the long haul, and it is within these sub-fields that the history of food has flourished. There are peer-review journals devoted to food studies and food history articles are found across the spectrum of other journals in a wide variety of disciplines. Moreover, the general public has become increasingly engaged in questions about today's global food economy and, as a result, is interested in the role of food in history.⁽¹⁾

Collingham's book is an impressive exposition of a complex subject, written in her thoroughly engaging prose style that readers may know from her earlier books. She asks 'Who was well fed during the war, who was hungry, who starved to death, and why?' She goes further to discover the long-term consequences for global food availability, and for the many different food cultures that were touched by the war. The book is divided into four parts: 1) 'Food — an engine of war'; 2) 'The battle for food'; 3) 'The politics of food'; and 4) 'The aftermath'. The book concentrates on America, Britain, Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union, but Italy, Australia, China, India, Greece, and Poland are among the other countries and regions that are introduced at crucial junctures as examples of the ways that the Second World War affected food economies, the war effort, and people's lives across the globe.

None of the primary combatant nations emerge looking very good. Parts of the story may be unsettling to Americans who call this 'the Good War' as well as to folks enjoying the current wave of celebratory nostalgia in Britain for reading about the foodways of wartime in books such as *The Ration Book Diet*, *Wartime Recipes*, and *Eating for Victory: Healthy Home Front Cooking on War Rations*.⁽²⁾ We witness the inhumanity of the war throughout the book. Collingham does not flinch in her explicit descriptions of what happens to bodies in the process of death by starvation, or of some of the darkest episodes of survival during the siege of Leningrad (while Communist party elites feasted on luxury foods), or how scientists working for German government calculated food rations that would keep prisoner/slave laborers nourished just enough to work while also starving to death. While Collingham does not dress up the grim appearance of the dead bodies that fell along the roads during famine across Asia, neither does she provide these details for ghoulish interest; this is the reality of the desperation for food during war and why governments and individuals are capable of deviating a long way from behavioral norms to have control of it. Not only food but other vital necessities, such as bed covering, clothes, and shelter were affected by requisition, theft, and simple destruction, which meant that misery was rampant throughout much of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and Asia. Blockades, too, meant that civilian starvation in some occupied territories, such as Greece and China, was unavoidable collateral damage.

In Britain, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Soviet Union, and the United States agricultural sectors were in tatters in the 1930s. The farms of the era were what the citizens of those countries today would without hesitation call primitive. 60 per cent of American farms were without electricity or running water; Germans farms lacked sewage connections; British farm houses had no electricity, gas or running water. Economic collapse and severe droughts meant that black children in the American South, like farm children in Japan, regularly went to bed hungry. Farming was barely mechanized in the 1930s and much more crop land was required to feed a stable population than it is today; a growing population needed even more land to produce enough food. The economic collapse of 1929, followed by protectionist agricultural policies, demonstrated to the Japanese and German that a drive for self-sufficiency, autarky, in food was the only policy that would make them more powerful nations. This thinking led the Nazi leadership to engineer the invasion of countries to the East to obtain land that German farmers needed for agricultural expansion. The Italians' solution to increasing food production was to be found in colonizing parts of North Africa and the Middle East and sending Italian farmers to live there. Collingham details a parallel story about Japan and the Japanese leaders' dream of colonizing Korea and China for food production. In broad terms these goals were similar.

By turning conquered territory into colonies, the aggressor nations, Germany, Italy, and Japan, could free themselves of Anglo-American (particularly American) domination and gather all the food resources they needed under their direct control. Each national leadership understood that the way to acquire the land they desired was to develop their own myth of manifest destiny, a rhetoric for public consumption of national expansion into empty land waiting to be cultivated. Each of these nations was dominated by political

extremists with militaristic ambitions and driven by a determination to find new markets, new sources of fuels, new sources of food, and new sources of cheap labor. Collingham is careful in drawing parallels as Germany, Italy and Japan conducted the pursuit of their goals differently. She considers both economic motivations (which were similar) as well as culturally-influenced behaviors (which were different).

Collingham draws on recent studies that put food at the center of the German motive for war. She argues that starvation was not (simply or just) a consequence of Nazi aggression, but a goal of war. *Lebensraum* in the East meant that non-Germans had to be removed; starvation and outright murder were two effective ways to clear the space. The author brings attention to new work on a formerly unknown (and even now relatively unknown) bureaucrat behind the Nazi Hunger Plan, Herbert Backe, who in his ideas about Nordic racial purity was as radical a thinker as the more infamous Walther Darré. Backe's role in the highest echelons of Nazi policy-making picked up as Darré's position was fading, yet he has been dismissed for decades by historians and there is no biography of him. Gesine Gerhard, who is currently at work on one, wrote in a recent article that 'Food politics, in fact, became genocidal politics under Backe'.⁽³⁾ Much of this research has been published in German and so may be new to many Anglophone readers.

Collingham is careful to stress that while the atrocities committed by the German and Japanese troops appear much the same, one difference is that the Nazi leadership set policies to annihilate Jews and others; Japanese policy at the top was not about mass murder. Nonetheless, she writes, Japanese disregard for the indigenous populations in their path was just as ruthless in its results. The Japanese mismanaged the food supply in the Asian and Southeast Asian territories under their control. For some Asian famines in this period we have no death tolls because no one kept track. Collingham writes that 'while the Japanese proved themselves to be remarkably successful at exporting chaos and hunger to their empire, they demonstrated an extraordinary inability to reap the benefits and maintain food imports to the home islands' (p. 247). Japanese soldiers started out as malnourished recruits from the countryside in the 1920s and 1930s, and they fared no better as troops in the field. They were usually sent out with utterly inadequate rations, forced to plunder and steal to survive. Collingham shows, however, that no matter the depth of the Japanese soldiers' misery and malnutrition, they were indoctrinated by the national culture of patriotism and honor, and surrender was never an option.

Soviet troops survived on chance discoveries of supplies wherever they found themselves. With German soldiers doing the same (and sending food and other supplies back to Germany) in the territories being fought over and occupied by these two armies, it was not long before there was simply nothing left to eat in vast areas of Eastern Europe. Here, starving Russian soldiers, while they felt no loyalty to Stalin's regime, would not stop fighting because the alternative – German occupation of their homeland – was unthinkable. Soviet citizens and soldiers who survived the war did so in spite of having less food than all of the other combatant nations save Japan. It is counter-intuitive that the devastating physical conditions that Soviet and Japanese soldiers and civilians withstood did not cause them to revolt against the conduct of the war. Collingham's insight is that when pushed to the brink of starvation, humans will not all behave similarly in the interest of self-preservation. National cultural ideologies play a role in how people react to even the harshest deprivation.

The United States was the only country that improved agriculturally during and after the war, resulting in an impressive capacity to produce food surpluses. This unique position translated into power in the wartime and post-war world. There was clear consensus within the US government on national priorities in terms of food supplies and a precise notion about where their allies fitted into the picture. American troops had far superior rations to all other soldiers. Civilians by and large experienced such wartime prosperity that, in spite of rationing, many Americans were eating better than ever. American plenty represented American greatness and it was a symbol of what the troops were fighting for.

The Taste of War follows the complex relationship between Britain and the United States over the matter of food shipments. In examining these wartime relations through the lens of food, Collingham demonstrates that during the Battle of the Atlantic there were important factors other than German U-boat attacks

threatening the British food supply. A significant rift resulted from American mistrust of British estimates for civilian food needs, and as a result the nation with the largest and most secure food resources to contribute to the war effort simply did not deliver the supplies they promised. She writes that regardless of the immense importance of the Battle of the Atlantic in British rhetoric and imagination, the nation was never in danger of starvation, or even hunger, and takes issue with the Minister of Food Lord Woolton's memoirs relating that he managed the food supplies as to just narrowly avert disaster for the British people.

With submarine warfare significantly reduced, Britain could turn to the Commonwealth for resources. Australia, Canada, and New Zealand were second only to the United States in wartime food production. For Britain's under-developed African and island colonial holdings, any benefits of wartime production were not spread evenly among the population. *The Taste of War* propounds the argument that 'the war intensified the exploitative nature of colonialism' (p. 120). Collingham writes that 'Britain was never as ruthless as Germany and Japan in its exploitation of its empire's resources, nor did it engage in deliberate acts of murder or dispossession, but its officials and politicians did act according to an unspoken food hierarchy which gave the lowest priority to the needs of the empire's colonial inhabitants' (p. 124). In fact, much of this book is a story of how entitlement to food mattered to many groups of people during the war and why the examination of entitlement reveals more about national ideology and culture than calculations about the amounts of foodstuffs that existed – an argument developed by Amartya Sen with regard to the Bengal famine of 1942, during which three million Indians starved to death. Entitlement is a timely topic today too, as nations in the developed world with financial access to food supplies continue to have plenty, even as we see recurring famines across Africa and grain riots in the Middle East because of the powerlessness of the populations to control their access to food.

In the early part of the book, Collingham deals primarily with bureaucracies and food production. Here she engages in social and economic analyses. Later in the book when discussing national systems of rationing there is good cultural analysis of differences between the goals and effects of food redistribution. She keeps politics in the forefront throughout, including sustained attention to the politics of class in wartime. Even in Britain, where rationing made enormous improvements in working-class access to a healthy diet, working-class families were still at a disadvantage. Especially in urban areas, food was expensive and allotments for growing food were small. In America, wartime prosperity bypassed impoverished areas of the South, doing little to improve African-American inequality.

Collingham gives a remarkable inventory of the changes that foodstuffs and eating habits underwent directly as a result of war. Wartime technology and science produced a revolution in agricultural productivity and food processing. Importantly, 'the war acted as a powerful vehicle for spreading the American way of eating across the globe' (p. 496). She commands skilfully a vast amount of material and her weaving together of thematic story lines is well done. Her sources are wide ranging with both primary and secondary accounts. Some of the audiences this book will reach – a general readership as well as social and cultural historians – will not be versed in the details of the impact of war on food on such a wide-ranging scale. If the book seems light on archival work, I don't think this constitutes a weakness, as Collingham's goal here seems to be to develop a largely synthetic work that brings together recent scholarship in a global social, economic, and cultural treatment of the centrality of food to the war. The project is in tune with the current interest in world food history. The author uses numerous autobiographies and other personal accounts that strike the right tone in reconstructing the wartime experience. The anecdotal at no point intrudes on the scholarly presentation of the narrative. The book's conclusion is actually an epilogue that continues decades into post-war world food culture and politics. This is a little bit of a shame, as I had hoped for more sustained analysis by way of conclusion, and other readers may wish to know from the beginning that Collingham's analytical moments are spread throughout the book.

Anthropologist Sidney Mintz has written that 'one of the abiding impressions one carries away from any serious reading of food history is of powerful forces for change, some natural or environmental, but many others of an economic or political kind, wearing away at old and massive food habits'.⁽⁴⁾ Collingham demonstrates that preparation for war and the war itself were just such forces in food cultures worldwide.

Changes from this period of history continue to have a heavy influence on what and how we eat today. It is right to ask whether we can take away any lessons to avert a battle for food in the future.

Notes

1. For an in-depth look at food historiography, see *Writing Food History: A Global Approach*, ed. Kyri W. Claflin and Peter Scholliers (London, forthcoming). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Wartime Recipes*, ed. D. Notley (Norwich, 1998). *Eating for Victory: Healthy Home Front Cooking on War Rations* (London, 2007). M. Brown, C. Harris, C. J. Jackson, *The Ration Book Diet* (Stroud, 2004). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. G. Gerhard, 'Food as a weapon: agricultural sciences and the building of a Greater German Empire', *Food, Culture & Society*, 14, 3 (September 2011), 342. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. S. W. Mintz, 'Food, culture and energy', in *Food and Globalization*, ed. A. Nützenadel and F. Trentmann (Oxford, 2008), p. 26. [Back to \(4\)](#)

The author will respond in due course.

Other reviews:

New Statesman

<http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2011/01/world-war-food-hunger-million> [2]

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/feb/05/war-food-lizzie-cunningham-review> [3]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8330511/The-Taste-of-War-World-War-Two-and-the-Battle-for-Food-by-Lizzie-Collingham-review.html> [4]

History Extra

<http://www.historyextra.com/book-review/taste-war-world-war-two-and-battle-food> [5]

Economist

<http://www.economist.com/node/18060808> [6]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-taste-of-war-world-war-two-and-the-battle-for-food-by-lizzie-collingham-2210904.html> [7]

Mad Padre

<http://madpadre.blogspot.com/2011/10/book-review-lizzie-collinghams-taste-of.html> [8]

Total Politics

<http://www.totalpolitics.com/life/156917/review-the-taste-of-war.thtml> [9]

British Food in America

<http://www.britishfoodinamerica.com/The-Hardship-War-Austerity-Number-Part-2/the-critical/It-left-a-bad-taste-The-Editor-considers-The-Taste-of-War-World-War-Two-and-the-Battle-for-Food-by-Lizzie-Collingham/> [10]

Bloomberg

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-02-01/mothers-turned-cannibal-as-hitler-wolfed-down-chocolates-george-walden.html> [11]

Spiked

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[6] <http://www.economist.com/node/18060808> [7] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-taste-of-war-world-war-two-and-the-battle-for-food-by-lizzie-collingham-2210904.html> [8] <http://madpadre.blogspot.com/2011/10/book-review-lizzie-collinghams-taste-of.html> [9] <http://www.totalpolitics.com/life/156917/review-the-taste-of-war.thtml> [10] <http://www.britishfoodinamerica.com/The-Hardship-War-Austerity-Number-Part-2/the-critical/It-left-a-bad-taste-The-Editor-considers-The-Taste-of-War-World-War-Two-and-the-Battle-for-Food-by-Lizzie-Collingham/> [11] <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-02-01/mothers-turned-cannibal-as-hitler-wolfed-down-chocolates-george-walden.html> [12] http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/reviewofbooks_article/10234/