

# Churchill's Efforts to Feed Germany after the Great War

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Churchill has been accused of ignoring pleas for food from Germany after World War I, most recently by Patrick J. Buchanan, who claims there is “no supporting evidence that Churchill ever made any sustained effort” to end the suffering. Well, here is the supporting evidence.

With America's entry into the First World War in 1917, the Allies finally had enough ships and manpower to implement a full naval blockade on Germany. The effects were mounting on 11 November 1918, when Germany surrendered and signed an armistice, with an agreement to work out a formal treaty later.

The Treaty of Versailles was not signed until 28 June 1919, and during the preceding seven months, the people of Germany continued to starve. It is estimated that 100,000 died during this time.<sup>1</sup> Churchill has been accused of ignoring pleas for help from Germany, most recently by Patrick J. Buchanan, who claims there is “no supporting evidence that Churchill ever made any sustained effort to end the starvation blockade.”<sup>2</sup>

The truth is that the German people had several champions who toiled to end their plight and one of them was Winston Churchill. But it took time for him to recognize the



The Secretary of State for War with Chief of Imperial General Staff Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson (right) inspecting British occupation forces, Cologne, August 1919.

Between them is Sir Archibald Sinclair, WSC's Military Secretary. Sinclair, later Lord Thurso, who was leader of the Liberal Party, 1935-45, and served as Churchill's Secretary of State for Air in the World War II Coalition government. Photo from the Sinclair collection and Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: A Photographic portrait* (1974).

severity of their situation.

After serving as Minister of Munitions from July 1917, Churchill became the Secretary of State for War and Air on 9 January 1919. His main task was developing a demobilization plan for three and one-half million British soldiers on the continent, all anxious to return home. During his first week in office, Churchill met with his military army commanders and drafted a plan. Throughout the rest of January, he labored to get his plan approved by the British cabinet and even traveled to Paris to meet with Prime Minister David Lloyd George, who was attending the peace conference.

By December 1918, prior to Churchill's arrival, the War Office had received several reports of food shortages in Germany.<sup>3</sup> The following month, British officers were sent to investigate. On 12 January, the German government stated that they had been able to make do since the Armistice, but that their food sup-

plies were about to “come to an end.”<sup>4</sup> The War Office continued to send officers and to receive reports until May.

Churchill did not fully appreciate conditions in Germany until the last weeks of February. On the last day of that month he openly voiced his concerns about the situation to the War Cabinet, with the Prime Minister in attendance, urging “winding up all military matters with the least possible delay.”<sup>5</sup> He said that all “intelligence received by him was to the same effect, that cruel privations were being suffered” by Germany, and that he “wished to see Germany treated humanely and adequately fed, and her industries re-started.”<sup>6</sup>

Churchill then took his concerns to the House of Commons. At the end of a lengthy demobilization report on March 3rd, he brought up “another matter which calls for very prompt settlement...the speedy enforcing of the Peace Terms upon Germany.”<sup>7</sup>

Churchill discussed British officers’ reports which revealed “the great privations which the German people are suffering” and “the danger of collapse of the entire structure of German social and national life under the pressure of hunger and malnutrition.”<sup>8</sup> In a poetic analogy, Churchill compared Europe to the *Titanic*, and each country to a compartment in the ship. The ship did not sink immediately, he said; instead it “had compartment after compartment invaded by the sea.”<sup>9</sup> His message was clear: Germany’s collapse would sink the rest of Europe.

Although Churchill’s words were reported by several newspapers, he was not convinced that people in Britain understood the seriousness of the situation. He wanted the British officers’ reports published, and was “anxious that a wise and humane policy should be adopted toward the

Germans in the zone of our occupied armies.”<sup>10</sup>

As Churchill received further reports from his officers and other ministries, he forwarded them to the War Cabinet.<sup>11</sup> On March 14th, he compiled the reports in book form and forwarded a copy to Lloyd George, asking permission to publish it.<sup>12</sup> Nine days later, after no response, he telegraphed the Prime Minister, asking again for permission to publish, with an aim to “induce a more humane feeling about the Germans.”<sup>13</sup> Lloyd George telephoned later that day, saying he had no objections.<sup>14</sup>

Food from the Allies finally arrived in Hamburg on 26 March, but it was not enough. Churchill continued to pester the Prime Minister. On April 7th he telegraphed: “I feel it is my duty to tell you that all my military advisers without exception agreed that the interior situation in Germany is approaching a catastrophe.”<sup>15</sup>

In early April, the War Office published *Reports by British Officers on the Economic Conditions Prevailing in Germany, December, 1918 - March, 1919*. Distributed to Parliament, press, and public, the 94-page document provided ten reports from seventeen British officers, including one Brigadier General, unanimously concluding that Germany needed food.

Unfortunately, few took notice. Churchill complained to a newspaper editor, “I cannot understand why the German White Book I published last week has scarcely been noticed by the Press. The situation in Germany is very serious indeed and can only be relieved by food and raw materials.”<sup>16</sup> The next day, Churchill again appealed to Lloyd George:

“All the soldiers are agreed that the most important military action required from the allies is to feed Germany, not only with food but

with raw materials, and to raise the blockade. They think that Germany is on the verge of a complete collapse....”<sup>17</sup>

With the bulldog tenacity for which he was already famous, Churchill was determined to make something happen. On 10 April he forwarded another report to the War Cabinet stating that many Germans were “literally starving,” that it was essential to give them “some hope of the future security and of at least a partial recovery.”<sup>18</sup>

The next day he gave a speech at the Aldwych Club, appealing publicly to help Germany. Referring to his neglected Germany book, he said that the officers all agreed that “the most vital step we ought to take immediately to secure victory is to feed Germany.”<sup>19</sup> He urged his audience not to let their “eyes be blinded with false counsel.”<sup>20</sup> The situation was grave, and the government’s responsibility was “to disarm Germany, to feed Germany, and to make peace with Germany.”<sup>21</sup>

Churchill’s speech was carried by *The Times* the next day. He asked that it be shared with German delegates to the peace conference because he was “concerned to see reports that they are beginning to despair of saving their country from Bolshevism.”<sup>22</sup>

Still Churchill was not satisfied. He wanted to address the press directly and “make them realise how foolish it is to go on saying that the German is only pretending, when conditions are so desperate.”<sup>23</sup>

On 16 April, Churchill published *Further Reports by British Officers on the Economic Conditions Prevailing in Germany, April, 1919*, an 18-page follow-up, concluding that “the most vital need is food” and that the food must be sent immediately in large quantities or the relief would only be temporary.<sup>24</sup>

The report also said there >>

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was “little danger at present from the old mobile army. The General Staff is powerless, and old regular officers are being dismissed.”<sup>25</sup> The fear of hostilities breaking out again (the main reason for continuing the blockade) was diminished. The report was carried by several papers, including *The New York Times*.<sup>26</sup>

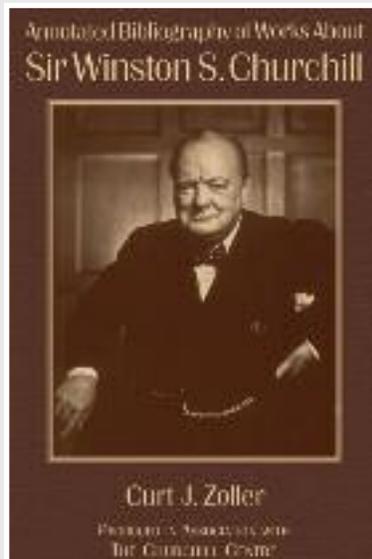
Churchill continued to pester the Prime Minister, the highest-ranking person to whom he had access, until the blockade was finally lifted on 11 July 1919.<sup>27</sup>

What is most remarkable about Churchill’s efforts to feed the defeated was that he was not deterred by his lack of authority over the blockade or the armistice terms, or over the peace negotiations. After his demobilization plan was in place, he focused on hard issues like the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Yet when Churchill discovered the drastic situation in Germany, he appealed not only to all levels of government, but to the press and public as well. The German people suffered severely during this period; but they had an advocate in Winston Churchill. ☺

**Endnotes**

1. Suda Bane and Ralph Lutz, eds., *The Blockade of Germany after the Armistice 1918-1919* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1942), 791.
2. Patrick J. Buchanan, *Churchill, Hitler, and the “Unnecessary War”: How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2008), 391.
3. See “Recent Reports Regarding Situation in Germany,” issued on 31 December 1918. War Office Papers 144/6/128-37.
4. Notes on the Meeting of the Armistice Commission held on January 12, 1919. War Office Papers 144/7/146-47.
5. Meeting Minutes. Martin Gilbert, ed. *Winston S. Churchill: Companion Volume IV, Part 1, January 1917-June 1919* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 557.

6. Ibid.
7. Robert Rhodes James, ed., *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches 1897-1963*, 8 vols. (New York: Bowker, 1974), III: 2684.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Telegram, Churchill to General Bartholomew, 7 March 1919. Chartwell Papers 16/15B/250.
11. See for example E. F. Wise’s “Note of Food Supplies for the Left Bank of the Rhine,” Churchill to War Cabinet, 6 March 1919. Lloyd George Papers F/8/3/26.
12. Telegram, Churchill to Lloyd George, 14 March 1919. Lloyd George Papers F/8/3/32.
13. Telegram, Churchill to Lloyd George, 23 March 1919. Chartwell Papers 16/5/110.
14. Telephone message, Lloyd George to Churchill, 23 March 1919. Chartwell Papers 16/5/111.
15. Telegram, Churchill to Lloyd George, 7 April 1919. Chartwell Papers 16/6/49.
16. Churchill to John Spender, editor of the *Westminster Gazette*, 8 April 1919. Chartwell Papers 16/6/51.
17. *Companion IV, Part 1*, 612.
18. F. L. Carsten, *Britain and the Weimar Republic: The British Documents* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 21.
19. *Complete Speeches*, III: 2773.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Churchill to Director of Military Intelligence, 12 April 1919. Chartwell Papers 16/16A/33.
23. Churchill to Director of Military Intelligence, 12 April 1919. Chartwell Papers 16/16A/26.
24. *Army, Further Reports by British Officers on the Economic Conditions Prevailing in Germany. April, 1919*. (London: HMSO, 1919), 18.
25. Ibid.
26. *The New York Times*, “Aid for Germany Declared Urgent: British White Paper Shows Economic Conditions as Found by Investigator,” 17 April 1919.
27. The blockade of Germany was eliminated only when the Reichstag ratified the Treaty of Versailles on 11 July 1919. C. Paul Vincent, *The Politics of Hunger: The Allied Blockade of Germany, 1915-1919* (Athens: Ohio University, 1985), 115.



**Curt Zoller’s Annotated Bibliography of Works About Sir Winston S. Churchill**, at 410 pages, is the most comprehensive bibliography of works about Churchill. It includes *frank, forthright reviews* on 700 books specifically about WSC. Also listed are works substantially about Churchill, articles, lectures, reviews, dissertations and theses. The book was a Farrow Award winner in 2004. Selling for up to \$189 on the web, it’s indispensable for the serious Churchill library. **SPECIAL!** We will include Curt’s *unabridged Addendum* (specify

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