

# How a band of Americans led a coalition to feed millions of German-occupied Belgians during WWI | Daily Mail Online

They were young and idealistic, most of them students and all but one of them male, many on a six-week break from their studies as they drove around Belgium with the ever-present sound of gunfire and shelling in the distance. They were neutral Americans thrust into the fraught war zone of WWI, only to be harassed by 'battle-hardened' German soldiers occupying Belgium and 'buttoned-up' native businessmen navigating their own pride and interests.

The Yanks were trying to feed a nation, supervising as provisions were shipped to and distributed through German-occupied Belgium. They were delegates with the US-led Commission for Relief in Belgium, an oft-forgotten effort spearheaded by future president Herbert Hoover which sent naïve, well-meaning Americans behind German lines before the US entered the war.

And the CRB succeeded; not only that, the effort became the largest food relief program the world had ever seen.

'No one ever thought it could be done,' says author Jeffrey B. Miller, who has written a new, comprehensive book about the CRB – published 100 years after the end of WWI – titled *WWI Crusaders: A band of Yanks in German-occupied Belgium help save millions from starvation as civilians resist the harsh German rule, August 1914 to May 1917.*

'And yet Hoover and a group of people – and the British people, the UK people – got behind it so much that it succeeded.

‘So it was an incredible operation. And everyone only talks about the trenches; they talk about the killing. Just over nine million soldiers died in the First World War; well, Herbert Hoover saved just over nine million people from starvation during the First World War. So there’s some great symmetry there, I think.’



**A column of German foot soldiers marches during the invasion of Belgium that began on August 4, 1914; the small neutral nation clamored to prepare for an occupation but relied heavily on imported food, and it soon became apparent that relief efforts would be needed**



The American-led Commission for Relief in Belgium, along with the Belgian Comite National de Secours et d'Alimentation, known as CN, sourced food for Belgium, shipped it to the small country and sent neutral American 'delegates' to make sure the food was not claimed by Germans until it was turned over to the CN for distribution



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Each CRB ship was outfitted with large signs on both sides to alert German U-boats that it was not an enemy vessel; Jeffrey B. Miller, author of new book *WWI Crusaders*, tells *DailyMail.com*: 'Every day, at any one time, there would be 50 ships, 50 ocean-going ships coming towards Rotterdam.' From there, the food was transferred to 500 canal barges; once they reached Belgium, 40,000 Belgian volunteers 'prepared the food and distributed the food to the nearly 10million civilians – so that, logistically, it's a massive, massive operation'

While the US-led relief effort – involving fewer than 200 delegates sent into Belgium to supervise – is rarely discussed in-depth in history books and other accounts, Miller grew up hearing about the program. His grandfather, Milton M. Brown, had been one of the young idealists who volunteered, and it was during the effort that he met Miller's Belgian grandmother.

'I get really passionate about this,' Miller tells *DailyMail.com*. 'This is my whole life's work, right now, is just to get the story out there.'

He adds: 'It's just to tell Americans, this is a story we should learn about ... it's always good to look at the past as a chart towards where we should go in the future. We did this totally without any self-interest; we went in there without any transactional thought in mind.'

'There was nothing expected in return; we did this because it was the morally and ethically right thing to do.'



© Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Archives  
American mining executive Herbert Hoover - who would later become the 31st US President - was living in London at the time of the German occupation and became the driving force behind the US-led Commission for the Relief of Belgium (CRB)

The American-led CRB, Miller says, ‘really radically changed the way the world does humanitarian aid.

‘The CRB also changed the way the world saw America and the way that America saw itself on the world stage, which is really interesting – because for the last 100 years ... anywhere there is a huge catastrophe, a major catastrophe in the world, or any time there are civilians in harm’s way, the first thought everybody has is: America will help. And that was not the case before World War I.’

Miller’s grandfather had always hoped to write a book about CRB – compiling letters and correspondence – and when he died in the 1980s, the author took up the mantle. His grandparents’ story is included in Miller’s newly published book *WWI Crusaders*, but the 700-page non-fiction tome also tells the story from start to finish of how the relief effort came to be, who was involved and how the whole thing – and the life stories of the key figures – played out.

Even before the CRB – and before the first shots in the war were fired – tiny, neutral Belgium was making provisions for occupation, Miller writes. The Belgian government ‘had bought the entire wheat supply on the market in Antwerp and stored it for the coming need. Some began stockpiling on a local level as well.’

The highly industrialized country, however, relied on imports for 75 percent of its food, and within weeks of the German occupation ‘the food situation was obvious to anyone who could read the signs,’ Miller writes.

‘According to one later history, “It was practically impossible to purchase more than a pound of flour or sugar at a time, and almost all stocks of tinned goods were sold out, bought by anxious people who besieged the shops in the desire to get hold of a private stock before all was gone. The price of food rose to exorbitant figures.”’

The Belgians began scrambling to come up with a solution, and ‘a group of wealthy individuals’ in Brussels – including three Americans – formed a non-governmental organization ‘for the purpose of supplying Brussels with food.’



**CRB volunteers included American Milton M. Brown, left, who met the Bunge family of Belgian activists, including (right, from l-r: Hilda, Eva and Erica); he later married Erica, and the pair became the grandparents of author Miller, who grew up hearing about the frequently overlooked CRB and his grandparents'**

## efforts during the war

The group, Comite Central de Secours d'Alimentation (Central Committee of Assistance and Provisioning) invited still-neutral American and Spanish ministers to be patrons, and it was quickly established that, in order for a relief effort to work, 'four major jobs had to be accomplished.'

'The Germans had to agree to allow the food in and to not requisition it,' Miller writes. 'The English had to allow food through the blockade that it was establishing to cut off Germany from world trade. Processes had to be developed for determining how much food was needed to feed Brussels; then the food had to be bought, shipped, and transported into Belgium; and then it had to be distributed to the 16 communes of Greater Brussels. Some entity had to be found to pay for such a giant undertaking.'

The book continues: 'The task was a little easier than some would have imagined. At this stage of the war, the German thought process was straightforward: they would not feed the Belgians; there was little left to take from Belgium; they needed every man at the front; peaceful Belgians did not require many soldiers to control; and Belgians would remain peaceful if they were fed.'

The Germans agreed, and planning began in earnest – and American mining engineer Herbert Hoover, who was living in London at the time with his wife and two sons, became hugely involved. Ultimately the CRB was formed, and the Comite Central transformed into the nationwide Belgian Comite National de Secours et d'Alimentation, known as CN.

It was stipulated that neutral American 'delegates' would put boots on the ground in Belgium to make sure the food was not claimed by Germans until it was turned over to the CN for distribution.

'The English had said, "Okay, we'll allow the food in" – and the Germans said, "Yeah, yeah, we won't touch the food,"' Miller tells DailyMail.com.

‘And the English said, “Hell, no – we don’t trust the damn Germans. We think they’re going to take the food anyway. So Hoover, you have to have neutral Americans as supervisors inside German-occupied Belgium.”’





**By September 1914, Belgians (left, right) throughout the country had no choice but to join the soup-kitchen lines as the country quickly consumed its dwindling supplies. Miller tells DailyMail.com that, various factions were mulling over such large-scale relief efforts, ‘No one ever thought it could be done ... And yet Hoover and a group of people – and the British people, the UK people – got behind it so much that it succeeded’**



When it came to organizing food relief efforts to German-occupied territory, Miller writes in the book: 'The Germans had to agree to allow the food in and to not requisition it. The English had to allow food through the blockade that it was establishing to cut off Germany from world trade. Processes had to be developed for determining how much food was needed to feed Brussels; then the food had to be bought, shipped, and transported into Belgium; and then it had to be distributed to the 16 communes of Greater Brussels. Some entity had to be found to pay for such a giant undertaking'



The Belgians prominently displayed the American flag wherever possible, including the children's canteen in Brussels, until the Germans demanded that most American flags be taken down. There was, however, 'constant stress and tension throughout this period on so many different levels,' Miller writes, explaining how 'the Belgians themselves – some of the upper echelon Belgians – were saying, "We don't need the Americans; this is rude. We want to do it ourselves. We should be allowed to do it ourselves." So they were harassing the Americans at a higher level, while the regular Belgians loved them. The regular Belgians just thought, "Hey, these are our salvation"'



Miller tells DailyMail.com: 'Just over nine million soldiers died in the First World War; well, Herbert Hoover saved just over nine million people from starvation during the First World War. So there's some great symmetry there'

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He says: 'Where would he get people who would drop everything, work for free, go into German-occupied Belgium and do a job no one had ever known before? Where could he find them in London or in England, when it was going to take months to get people from America because there were no commercial airlines? They all had to come by steam ship.'

'Well, he went to Oxford University – the Rhodes Scholar program,' Miller says. 'This is a great story. These students were about to go on six weeks'

winter break, and so they said, “Of course” – with their spirit of adventure, young men. They said, “Of course we’ll go.”

‘One of them was 19 years old – only 19 years old – [and] had to go into German-occupied Belgium, face battle-hardened German officers and button down Belgian businessmen ... It’s a story you can’t make up.’

After the first batch of delegates, more recruits were brought over from the States, most in their 20s, many of them ‘Ivy Leaguers,’ Miller tells DailyMail.com. ‘There were only about 185 of these young men and one woman.’

Future president Hoover, he says, ‘did everything.

‘He set up everything and he brought – this is what was so amazing – he brought business practices and business organization to what had been, in the past, humanitarian relief by kind of wealthy people who didn’t really know what they were doing.’

It was, however, a massive effort.

‘Every day, at any one time, there would be 50 ships, 50 ocean-going ships coming towards Rotterdam,’ Miller tells Dailymail.com. From there, the food was transferred to 500 canal barges; once they reached Belgium, 40,000 Belgian volunteers ‘prepared the food and distributed the food to the nearly 10million civilians – so that, logistically, it’s a massive, massive operation.’

The delegates ‘were the only ones in Belgian other than the military that could use an automobile, because they had to go from province to province – about 40 of these men in Belgium at any one time – and they were scattered around through the provinces.’

He continues: ‘They had to drive around almost all the time supervising, going to the warehouses, checking the bakers who were baking the bread,

checking to make sure that the Germans weren't taking the food. As they're driving around, they have passes from the German Governor General saying that they are there on food relief, and don't harm them or stop them.

'Well, the German sentries at the sentry posts that were throughout Belgium, they all thought they were spies – and they would strip search them. They would take apart their cars looking for contraband. It was a constant setup of hassle and harassment.'

Miller's book includes the stories of about 50 delegates, including one arrested for no apparent reason and kept in custody for days by the Germans, worrying that no one knew where he was or what might happen to him.

'Throughout Belgium, they could always hear the big guns going off in the trenches, the huge artillery guns,' Miller tells DailyMail.com, calling it 'a reminder of: You shouldn't be here, you should be in the trenches, look what's happening – and the mental stress and tension of that was an incredible thing for these young men.'

'I mean, think about that – they're not completely fully formed yet, and they're having to deal with these kinds of conditions.'

Miller says: 'A lot of the actual physical work was a lot of documentation, a lot of checking of invoices ... making sure the bakers used the exact amount of flour to create the exact sized loaves of bread – tedious stuff, on one hand.'

'And then on the other hand, they had to also turn in Germans or report Germans who were stealing the food ... or that there were some smugglers that they caught, those kinds of things.'

As the delegates endeavored to feed a nation and complete their volunteer

duty, however, controversy continued to rage about the CRB program itself.

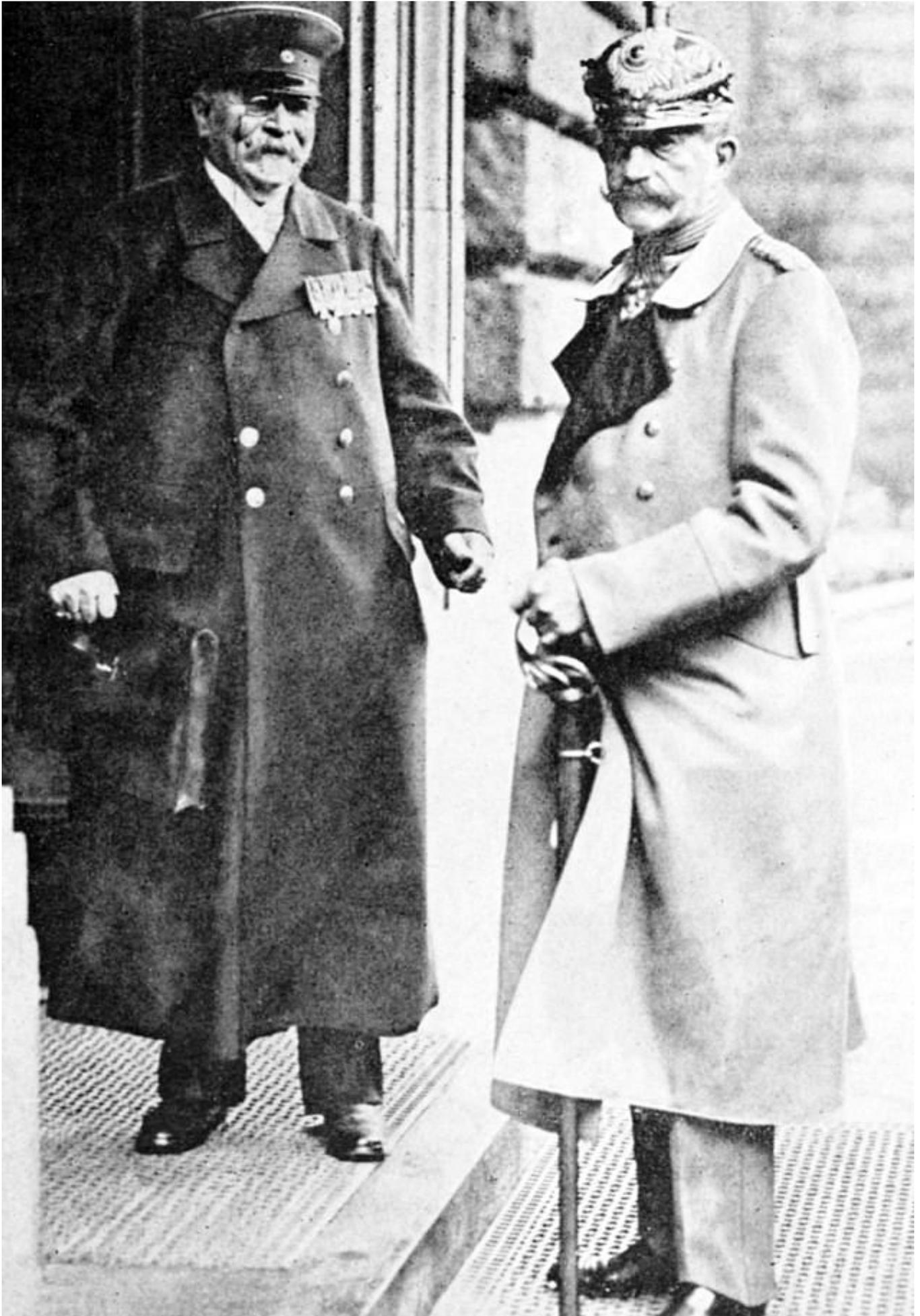
‘The English military totally opposed this, led by Winston Churchill, because they said it prolonged the war,’ Miller tells DailyMail.com. ‘Well, Herbert Hoover knew the only way he was going to succeed in this program was to get worldwide opinion behind him – so he really manipulated the press. He did an incredible job to make sure that the story of Belgium was always in the press all over.’

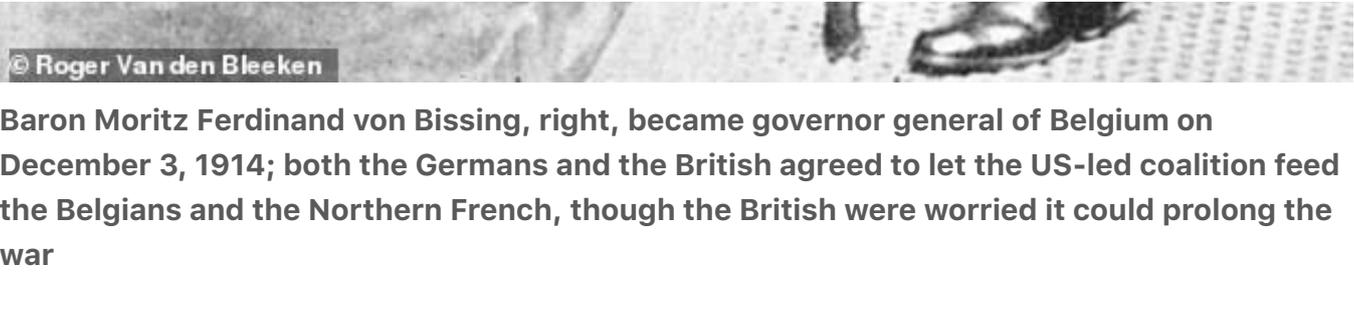
### **First World War images colourised for Armistice centenary**



The ancient Belgian university town of Louvain in ruins after the Germans ransacked it on August 25-30, 1914; when American CRB delegates later arrived in Belgium, they were among the only people besides German soldiers allowed to use automobiles as they traveled from province to province checking on food delivery and proper distribution







© Roger Van den Bleeken

Baron Moritz Ferdinand von Bissing, right, became governor general of Belgium on December 3, 1914; both the Germans and the British agreed to let the US-led coalition feed the Belgians and the Northern French, though the British were worried it could prolong the war



According to Miller's book, Belgian children were the most affected by the war and the relief program, followed closely by the destitute, 'who had little before the war and had practically nothing during the German occupation'



© Jeffrey B. Miller

**Wealthy Belgians often opened up their homes to CRB delegates; pictured is the Chateau Oude Gracht on Hoogboom estate, home to Antwerp merchant Edouard Bunge, father of Erica, who would become the author's great-grandfather**



When the United States joined the war in April 1917, American CRB delegates were swapped for observers of other neutral nations; Miller writes at the end of his new book: 'Unfortunately, most of the CRB delegate stories have long been forgotten, innocent victims swept away by the tidal wave of negative public opinion surrounding Hoover's later efforts as president. Because Hoover is perceived as having been a bad president, much of his great humanitarian work and the work of those associated with the relief have been neglected ... Their stories deserve to be told and remembered'



Miller tells DailyMail.com that he feels 'really passionate' about the history and impact of the CRB. 'This is my whole life's work, right now, is just to get the story out there,' he says, adding: 'It's just to tell Americans, this is a story we should learn about ... it's always good to look at the past as a chart towards where we should go in the future. We did this totally without any self-interest; we went in there without any transactional thought in mind. There was nothing expected in return; we did this because it was the morally and ethically right thing to do'

## **Harrowing WW1 footage shows what life was like on Western Front**

Hoover had 'complete trust and support of the British people, so that's why the British government – civilian government – could not go along with what the British military wanted to do ... and the same with the Germans,' Miller says. 'The civilian government felt they needed to, because they didn't want bad public opinion in the world. They decided they were not going to shut down the CRB, even though the German military wanted them to shut it down.'

'There was constant stress and tension throughout this period on so many different levels. And then the Belgians themselves – some of the upper

echelon Belgians – were saying, “We don’t need the Americans; this is rude. We want to do it ourselves. We should be allowed to do it ourselves.” So they were harassing the Americans at a higher level, while the regular Belgians loved them. The regular Belgians just thought, “Hey, these are our salvation.””

Miller’s grandmother was one of those regular Belgians, a young woman helping in the relief effort herself, working to provide much-needed milk to the children of Antwerp. The author found out after her death that she’d kept a diary, and an edited version – edited by the author’s mother – also proved a useful source for him during his research.

His grandfather’s correspondence from his time in Belgium was also incredibly useful.

‘When he got back after the war, he asked everyone to send him copies of his letters back to him,’ Miller tells DailyMail.com. ‘He had a huge collection of all of the letters he had written to everyone ... He had done almost all the work for me, from the personal standpoint.’

Ultimately, however, the American CRB delegates had to leave when the US entered the war in April 1917; they were swapped out with other neutral representatives, though Hoover was allowed to remain in charge of the effort.

‘Unfortunately, most of the CRB delegate stories have long been forgotten, innocent victims swept away by the tidal wave of negative public opinion surrounding Hoover’s later efforts as president,’ Miller writes in the book’s epilogue. ‘Because Hoover is perceived as having been a bad president, much of his great humanitarian work and the work of those associated with the relief have been neglected.

‘Their stories deserve to be told and remembered.’

While Miller has wanted since childhood to share that history – and the story of his own grandparents – he feels that now, 100 years after the end of WWI and in the midst of such a politically charged atmosphere, is an ideal time to publish his book.

The effort marked ‘one of our finest hours as human beings,’ he tells DailyMail.com, adding: ‘This is just one of the finest moments of American history for Americans – and boy, don’t we need that as Americans right now? To hear a really good story about how we’ve done good things in the past.’