The Founding of the

HOOVER WAR LIBRARY

Less than twenty years after graduating from Stanford’s “Pioneer” class with a degree in geology, Herbert Hoover reached the heights of fortune as a hugely successful mining engineer with business interests spanning four continents. His family had grown to include two sons, in addition to his wife and college sweetheart, Lou Henry. The onset of the Great War, however, would dramatically alter his life. In a few short years he would coordinate the greatest humanitarian relief effort the world had ever known, his achievements and his reputation for supreme efficiency eventually leading him to the presidency of the United States. Meanwhile, his determination to document everything about the war inspired him to establish, at his beloved Stanford, what would become the premier institution for the study of war, revolution, and peace in modern times.

At the outbreak of World War I, in August 1914, Herbert and Lou Henry Hoover were in London organizing relief and transportation for Americans fleeing Europe. Their successful efforts motivated the American ambassador to Britain to ask Hoover to organize the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) to feed Belgian citizens starving under German occupation and the British blockade of their country. That ambitious enterprise provided food, medicine, and clothing to millions of Belgians, as well as Frenchmen in Northern France, on a daily basis for the duration of the war. When America entered the war in April 1917, President Wilson appointed Hoover as head of the U.S. Food Administration. After the war, as the director general of the American Relief Administration (ARA), Hoover coordinated humanitarian relief on a monumental scale to more than twenty countries. The ARA even conducted a massive famine relief operation in Bolshevik Russia from 1921 to 1923, feeding eleven million people a day at its height.

At the time of his humanitarian endeavors in Europe, Hoover began to appreciate that his position afforded him the opportunity not only for documenting the work of the CRB but also for collecting other historical materials related to the war. In 1915, E. D. Adams, a Stanford history professor and friend of Hoover’s, suggested he donate the records of the CRB to his alma mater, given their immense value as the documentary record of an organization unprecedented in its scope and mission. Adams’s suggestion, which he offered to “the Chief” more than once during the course of the war, may have helped Hoover arrive at a far more ambitious plan: to begin a special library collection on the Great War. (In his later years, Hoover also cited the biography of Andrew D. White as an inspiration. White, former president of Cornell University, had amassed a collection of primary sources relating to the French Revolution, with a special emphasis on ephemeral materials, such as pamphlets and newspapers.)

On April 23, 1919, Lou Henry Hoover received a telegram from her husband stating that if Adams and Stanford’s president, Ray Lyman Wilbur, kept it confidential, he would allot fifty thousand dollars to underwrite a “mission to Europe to collect historical material on war.” But, wondered Adams and Wilbur, did Hoover mean only his CRB materials or did he envision something more? After seeking clarification, Adams and Wilbur received a second telegram on May 15, in which Hoover succinctly stated that “my idea is simply collect library material on war generally.” Within a week, Adams was bound for Paris, where in mid-June he conferred with Hoover, who reemphasized his desire to develop a comprehensive historical record of the war, with a particular emphasis on socioeconomic conditions. Soon a network of ARA personnel would fan across Europe to acquire materials. In the coming months and years, several discerning collectors would spearhead the development of the Hoover War History Collection, as it was initially called.