

# HUNGER AS A WEAPON



## GNSI DECISION BRIEF

*It's a story as old as history: a belligerent uses hunger and food insecurity as weapons of manipulation, oppression and coercion against a population. Today these devastating acts continue despite the mounting global resistance to the use of hunger as a weapon.*



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May 3, 2023

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May 03, 2023

## Hunger as a Weapon of War

### Overview

Maslow's hierarchy of needs places physiological needs as the foundation of all others.<sup>i</sup> The needs of food, water, and shelter are referred to as objects indispensable to survival (OIS). A person will think of little else until these basic needs are met, hence the power OIS have over populations. The concept of hunger as a weapon dates to the beginning of written history with Homer's Iliad describing the siege of Troy. In war, military leaders often consider foodstuffs as it relates to their war effort while analyzing ways to use this basic need against their foe. As the quote attributed to Napoleon goes, "an army marches on its stomach." Russian's scorched earth policy during Napoleon's 1812 invasion would lead to his Grande Armée's defeat from lacking access to provisions from the countryside. This brief will examine the methods of starvation that militaries have used and continue to use in warfare. It will also explore how the United States and its allies can build resilient food supply chains to withstand crises and conflict.

### Starvation as a Mechanism of Control

The centrality of food to life makes it a means of control. States have used starvation (the intentional deprivation of OIS) to achieve strategic objectives (obj). Conley and de Waal note these objectives as, "(1) extermination or genocide; (2) control through weakening a population; (3) gaining territorial control; (4) flushing out a population; (5) punishment; (6) material extraction / theft; (7) extreme exploitation; (8) war provisioning; and (9) comprehensive societal transformation."<sup>ii</sup> History has many examples of hunger furthering these aims: Roman soldiers reportedly salted the earth around Carthage in 146 BC (obj 1)<sup>iii</sup>; the Holodomor (1932-1933) in Ukraine (obj 1,2,3,6)<sup>iv</sup>; the Holocaust and Nazi Germany's Hunger Plan in the Soviet Union (obj 1,2,3); the US's Operation Starvation against Japan in 1945 (obj 2,3,5);<sup>v</sup> the 1949 Berlin Crisis (obj 2,3,5)<sup>vi</sup>; and the Great Chinese Famine (1958-1962) (obj 2,9).<sup>vii</sup>

### Hunger in War

According to the World Food Program (WFP), in 2023, around 345 million people worldwide are food insecure (up from 103 million in 2017) while 900,000 of those individuals live in famine-like conditions.<sup>viii</sup> The WFP noted the impact of conflict on food access, "Conflict is still the biggest driver of hunger, with 70 percent of the world's hungry people living in areas afflicted by war and violence."<sup>ix</sup> In a 2022 speech, Ambassador Lisa Carty

declared, "More and more, belligerents are intentionally destroying farms or blocking trade routes with the express purpose of causing people to starve."<sup>x</sup> Currently the weaponization of hunger continues in conflict zones like Ethiopia, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification program has codified the severity of famine conditions in most of these conflicts.<sup>xi</sup> The following sections will examine how belligerents still use hunger as a weapon.

### *Ethiopia – Lay Siege to the Region and Deny Aid*

In 2020, the Ethiopian forces entered the Tigray region to reestablish government control. This operation (with Eritrean support) entailed a communications blackout along with isolating the region from outside aid and trade.<sup>xii</sup> In addition, "The Ethiopian government has besieged the region...closing banking and trade and restricting humanitarian aid... This tactic has been used alongside a campaign of destruction, pillage, rape and killing that has wrecked the economy..."<sup>xiii</sup> U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has alluded to these tactics as, "...acts of ethnic cleansing."<sup>xiv</sup> The aim of these operations seems to be establishing control in the region while devastating the minority Tigray ethnic group. In Syria, the Assad regime has used similar tactics of denying aid to starve out rebels in besieged areas.<sup>xv</sup>

### *South Sudan – Burn the Crops and Raze the Market*

Since 2013, a civil war has plagued South Sudan. Both government and opposition forces have used, "starvation tactics include[ing] the large-scale and systematic burning and razing of homes and property; destruction of food crops and markets; and targeted attacks on humanitarian aid workers..."<sup>xvi</sup> The belligerents have restricted the movement of food and implemented a campaign of looting of markets and homes while targeting civilians carrying even a morsel of food, accusing them of supporting the other side.<sup>xvii</sup>

Denying civilians sustenance has allowed forces to control peoples' movements or force them off their land. Government forces have set up check points to prevent farmers from going to their fields. In places without soldiers, people have stopped farming for fears of future reprisals. This situation has further degraded food supplies as the opposing forces confiscate food for war provisions. Government forces have engaged in a scorched-earth campaign of burning homes, looting property and forcibly displacing civilians denying food for

enemy troops. Soldiers have shot villagers' livestock, stole peanuts, cassava, and other foodstuffs.<sup>xviii</sup> The UN has called these acts part of an "ethnic cleansing" program causing over a million people to flee the country. This situation has led to largest movement of civilians in Africa since the 1994 Rwandan genocide.<sup>xix</sup>

### **Ukraine – Mine the Fields and Blockade the Ports**

Russian forces fighting in Ukraine have used hunger to reach objectives while also increasing global food insecurity. As Ambassador Carty noted, "Ukraine is the world's fifth largest exporter of wheat and the second largest exporter of sunflower oil. Russia has disrupted these staple crops by bombing civilian infrastructure, placing landmines in Ukrainian soil, and even... repeatedly damaging Ukrainian grain storage facilities..."<sup>xx</sup> In addition, Russian forces have been, "besieging entrapped populations, attacking grocery stores and agricultural areas and granaries, deploying land mines on agricultural land, blocking wheat-laden ships from leaving Ukrainian harbors and destroying a critical grain export terminal in Mykolaiv... Russia has decided to withhold fertilizers from the market."<sup>xxi</sup>

These tactics employed by Russian forces have allowed them to seize territory, resupply, and force Ukrainian civilians off occupied territory. Ambassador Carty also highlighted global effects of these tactics, "In Yemen, the number of people facing famine is projected to increase five-fold by June... and that was a projection before Russia's war of choice began to affect food prices."<sup>xxii</sup>

### **The Ethical and Legal use of Hunger in War**

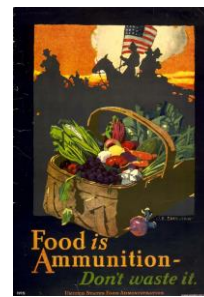
The use of hunger as a weapon has only recently been condemned by the international community. During the American Civil War, Union forces operated under General Orders that included, "War is not carried on by arms alone. It is lawful to starve the hostile belligerent, armed or unarmed, so that it leads to the speedier subjection of the enemy."<sup>xxiii</sup> The US Department of Defense officially renounced this position as the global view of hunger as a weapon started to change in the aftermath of World War II. The Geneva Conventions' additional Protocol II of 1977 codified this change stating, "starvation as a method of combat is prohibited. It is therefore prohibited to attack, destroy, remove or render useless, for that purpose, OIS of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works."<sup>xxiv</sup>

This shift in view is complemented by the 'right to life' and 'right to food' protected under International Human Rights Law. International Criminal Law also addresses acts that may constitute the war crime of starvation.<sup>xxv</sup> The 2005 UN World Summit Outcome Document established the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) populations from "genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing."<sup>xxvi</sup> The R2P calls for

states to protect their own populations from these crimes, but also that other states should assist in the protection of population. It was not until 2018, that for the first time, the UN Security Council (UNSC) unanimously adopted UNSC Resolution 2417, that clearly denounced the use of hunger as a weapon of war. In 2022, the US House and Senate have proposed resolutions to formally condemn the use of starvation as a weapon of war.<sup>xxvii</sup>

### **Food Security in Times of Crisis**

Despite the Geneva Conventions, International Law, and the stigma associated with hunger as a weapon, countries must prepare for the inevitable use of it in future conflicts. This concept of developing a strong home front to withstand shocks to food supplies is not new. Food security has massive affects across the sectors of healthcare, education, workforce, and military readiness. During World War II, on the US and Canadian home fronts, 'Victory Gardens' were encouraged to reduce the civilian demand on food supplies. By 1943, the US had over 18 million such gardens. Public notices informed citizens that kitchen scraps could feed chickens and pigs. After the war, the 'Victory Gardens' faded from backyards as their necessity declined.<sup>xxviii</sup> This issue is not just food production but also consumption. The nutritional value of diets also matters as seen with the Canadian level of malnutrition during the war being linked to high military rejection rates and loss of production in factories.<sup>xxix</sup>



Today, few households could self-sustain even partially if food supply chains faltered. Some nations have recognized fragility in food security as a national security issue and have implemented policies to address it. According to the Global Food Security Index (GFSI), Finland is the most food secure country in the world while the United States sits in 13<sup>th</sup> place.<sup>xxx</sup> Finland has accomplished this through policies that promote economic development and food system connectivity at the local levels mitigating supply chain disruptions.<sup>xxxi</sup> The GFSI noted the US has limited access to agricultural technology, education, and resources hindering its resiliency. Additionally, the GFSI suggested the US should improve its food security policy commitments by establishing a food security agency and strategy, while increasing efforts to protect the biodiversity of its land, oceans, rivers and lakes strengthening its food security environment.<sup>xxxii</sup> At the end of 2022, the Biden administration released National Security Memorandum-16 (NSM-16) on food security and resilience outlining guidance to access threats, strengthen coordination between the private sector and the government, and to enhance preparedness and response. NSM-16 addresses many of GFSI's notes but provides no timeline for implementation.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

## Decision Points

- Should the US follow the GFSI recommendation of creating a food security agency or continue the effort under the Department of Agriculture and the EPA?
- In 2021, the United States was the largest food importer and exporter measured in dollar value. The food imported primarily created more variety for the US consumer. Should the US reevaluate its dietary habits to support a healthy, self-sustaining, and economical model? Should it encourage Victory Gardens to become more resilient?<sup>xxxiv</sup>
- Under the R2P, should the United States get more involved in conflicts where hunger is used as a weapon? Ambassador Carty noted, “For our part,

- the US will continue to deliver lifesaving assistance through USAID and Feed the Future. We will continue to be the single largest country donor to the World Food Program and the Food and Agriculture Organization.” What else can the United States do?
- A major focus of the Marshall Plan for Europe after World War II was to prevent the starvation and social upheaval that had followed World War I. Should the UN and US look for ways to extend stability through a similar program in conflict zones around the world?
  - What can/should International Organizations like the UN, NATO, and the African Union along with International Non-Government Organization do to minimize the impact of hunger in conflict zones?

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### Disclaimer:

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