

## Contested History

### The Irish Potato Famine: Genocide or Political Mismanagement?

#### Descriptor

*The Irish Potato Famine was a significant event in modern Irish History. The Irish population today remains less than the population before the famine. The Irish have had a contentious history with the British and the debate about if the famine equated to mismanagement or genocide is one that is hotly contested.*

The potato blight was a disease that destroyed potato crops across Europe in the seventeenth century. The blight began in the United States from a fungus called *phytophthora infestans*. It arrived in Europe in 1845 through infested cargo holds. European farmers attempted to strengthen their potatoes by crossbreeding with American potatoes, unwittingly infecting their healthy crops (History.com, 2019, para 1). Unlike other countries, Ireland was heavily reliant on potatoes due to their climate and land management. The potato had great power in Irish culture and economy. Since the potato was cheap and easy to produce, lower classes had a particular reliance for sustenance and income (Iomaire, Gallagher, 2009, para 5). The infection initially caused up to half of Ireland's potato crops to be destroyed in 1845 and then three quarters in the next seven years (History.com, 2019, para 1). 1.1 million Irish people died due to the famine and two million emigrated to other countries (Extra Credits, 2019, 0:55-1:46). The potato blight caused many deaths across all of Europe but affected Ireland the most, commonly known as the Irish Potato Famine. The historiography of the Potato Famine in Ireland is hotly contested. While some believe the large loss of life during the blight was the result of political and economic mismanagement by the British, others argue that it equated to genocide.

A long history of conflict between the Irish and British predates the 'famine'. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Anglo-Norman Lords settled in Ireland but failed to control the whole island, so there were still native Lords and Kings ruling concurrently (Schama, 2011, para 5). King Henry VIII decided to conquer all of Ireland and defeated them in the "9 Year War". In 1603 James I became the King of England and in 1604 he united Ireland, Scotland and England under British rule. There were frequent rebellions from the Irish Catholics against the Protestant king. To gain control, British rulers confiscated land from the Irish and gifted them to British Protestants, believing their regional presence would help quell the rebellions. There were more rebellions staged by the Irish, but they were defeated by Oliver Cromwell in 1649 and William of Orange in 1690. When Theobald Wolfe Tone led another rebellion, the British government united all the kingdoms under one rule to control the protests. Economic struggles paired with poverty sparked the Home Rule Movement in the 1870s. This is where the Irish demanded their own government, excluding the north. Ireland was still a part of the United Kingdom, but they had their own state government. Home rule was stalled during World War I which led to a republican-led rebellion in 1916, known as the Easter Rising. In 1921, Ireland split into Northern and Southern Ireland but still under British rule. There was still pushback in the south and eventually gained independence as the Republic of Ireland (Suibhne, 2017, 2:54-5:21).

It is contested if the potato famine was political mismanagement, or a genocide performed by the British. At the outset, it's important to define the term genocide. The United Nations definition of genocide is:

*"...acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, such as:*

- a. Killing members of the group;*
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;*
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;*
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;*
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."*

(United Nations, n.d, para 4)

The definition of genocide specifies that serious bodily harm caused to a group can contribute to genocide. 10-15% of deaths were related to malnutrition with others being related to physical weakness, depression and a suppressed immune system. The suppression of the immune system caused outbreaks of cholera, smallpox, and respiratory illnesses. It is believed that fevers and other illnesses caused up to 50% of deaths in the famine. Because of the economic problems, many Irish people deserted their homes in search of work, spreading diseases. Hygiene was low, especially among lower classes (Powderly W. G, 2019). In 1847 a doctor wrote a series of letters to the editor of a Scottish newspaper: The Southern Reporter. Outlining his experiences in Skibbereen, a town in Cork, he wrote "Legions of half-naked, starving people parade the streets of this town, from morning until night... in every direction nothing but misery...". The same doctor observed "Disease in every hovel, and death in every hamlet" (Durrhistory, 2015). The outcomes of the blight clearly reflect the United Nations definition of genocides destroying in part an ethnic group.

The question is, did the British intend to destroy the Irish nation? Undoubtedly, the British did not bring the blight into Ireland. It is recorded that there were English people who were sympathetic towards the Irish. The British association for the Relief of Extreme Distress managed to raise £470,000. Large contributions came from Prime Minister Russell, Treasury Secretary Trevelyan and Queen Victoria. At first Queen Victoria only donated £1000, but after the organisation shamed her for her small donation, she doubled it. In November 1846, an organisation called the Quakers opened a soup kitchen in Cork. There were about 160,000 Irish people living in workhouses and they became overcrowded. An officer at the Board of Work wrote to Treasury Secretary Trevelyan saying "The fact is that the system [relief program] ... is no longer beneficial employment to many; their bodily strength being gone, and spirits depressed, they have not power to exert themselves sufficiently to earn the ordinary day's wages." He then suggested that the government should switch to providing soup kitchens, like those of Quakers. He stated, "You will perceive the great benefits derived from the soup establishments and how very cheap is the preparation." The Treasury Secretary disapproved of this idea as one of he believed that the government should not interfere with economies. His belief was if cheap food was provided, merchants would suffer and would encourage laziness. Despite this, the government passed the Act for the Temporary Relief of Destitute Persons in Ireland in 1847. The government planned on opening 2000 soup kitchens across Ireland but only opened 1,250. Because the government was struggling to set up soup

kitchens, they began firing people from relief work. By June 1847, nearly all relief workers had been fired. Although the soup kitchens ultimately failed, evidence shows British people did try to aid the Irish during the famine (Great Irish Famine Feeding the Hungry with the Establishment of Soup Kitchens, 2020).

A further case for genocide is the economic impacts. The blight caused many Irish people to lose their livelihoods and to be displaced from their homes. Many people paid rent through selling potatoes as they were the cheap to produce. Because of the blight, many landowners changed farms from arable farming to livestock to secure income. Landlords evicted many Irish families, even ones that paid rent on time, made legal by the creation of the Encumbered Estates Act (Great Irish Famine Eviction of the Irish Tenant Peasantry, 2020, para 16). All these things combined left many Irish people unemployed and homeless (dailyhistory, n.d, para 5). One official said, “[The evicted] betake themselves to the ditches or the shelter of some bank, and there exist like animals till starvation... There were three cartloads of these creatures, who could not walk... some in fever, some suffering from dysentery, and all from want of food.” (Great Irish Famine Eviction of the Irish Tenant Peasantry, 2020, para 20). Britain’s economic policies were enforced for the betterment of the British economy, inflicting economic hardship on the Irish.

Due to the famine, there were multiple political outcomes which are the strongest case for supporting the claim that “*acts committed with intent to destroy*” were performed. Because of the failing economy, there was an act put in place by the British parliament called the Encumbered Estates Act of 1848. This allowed the government to auction off properties owned by Irish people that were in severe debt (The History Place, 2000, para 2). The intent of this act was that English investors would buy Irish estates to transform Irish agriculture (Staunton, 2011, para 2). Between 1849 and 1854, nearly 50,000 families were evicted (The History Place, 2000, para 2). Most evictees were unwell so didn’t resist, but there was a minority who protested. In 1847, there were seven landlords shot. This caused panic among landlords. After this, the government passed the Crime and Outrage act of 1847. This act implemented gun control and increased British soldier presence in Ireland. Did British law-makers “[inflict] on the [Irish] conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction?” This is unknown as we will never know the intentions behind the Acts. The Prime Minister at the time, John Russell stated that the landlords should not have been surprised by the uprising as they “turn[ed] out fifty persons at once and burn[ed] their houses over their heads, giving them no provision for the future.” Russell urged for the evictions to be outlawed. Eventually there were laws passed regarding evictions; however the House of Lords managed to limit many of the provisions since they were landlords themselves. The laws made it more expensive for landlords to evict tenants and have them criminally charged for destruction of a tenants’ home (Great Irish Famine Eviction of the Irish Tenant Peasantry, 2020). When another blight hit in 1879, there were new possibilities of eviction and starvation. However, by this time there was a political organisation called Land League. They would organise boycotts against landlords, encourage the burning of leases and had the members physically block evictions. The ‘Land Wars’ were the beginning of the British reforms and introduced the Land Act of 1881. This granted official rent reductions (The History Place, 2000). The famine caused many acts and laws to be implemented in British law.

It can also be argued that there was intent to cause harm to the Irish people shown through policies. The United Nations states that intent could include the existence of a State policy. It is speculated why the Irish didn’t eat other crops. Reports show that there were exports of food from Ireland to Britain during the famine. A letter was published in the newspaper *The Nation* in 1845, “With starvation at our doors, grimly staring us, vessels laden with our

sole hopes of existence, our provisions, are hourly wafted from our every port. From one milling establishment I have last night seen not less than fifty dray loads of meal moving on to Drogheda, thence to go to feed the foreigner, leaving starvation and death the sure and certain fate of the toil and sweat that raised this food” (Gillissen, 2014, para 10). This excerpt recounts a parish priest witnessing the export of Irish produce. Although the records of food exports from Ireland to Britain are inadequate or missing, due to the Union and free trade agreements, it is known that almost 4000 vessels carried food from Ireland to Britain. During the second wave of the blight, exports to Britain comprised of livestock including over 4000 horses. There was an increase in exports for most livestock; in total over three million live animals were exported between 1846-50, more than the amount of people who emigrated. In 1847, 9,992 calves were exported to Britain, a 33% increase from the previous year (Kinealy, n.d). Irish writer John Mitchel, who lived through the famine, believes that if the exports of Irish food stopped during the famine, many lives would have been saved. In his book *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* he stated the famous line, ‘The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine’ (Gillissen, 2014, para 9).

The potato blight was brought to Europe in 1843, however affected Ireland the most due to their reliance on the potato. Social, economic and political outcomes impacted on the deaths of many Irish people. This report explored whether the ‘potato famine’ was genocide or political mismanagement. There is no clear answer to this thesis. The truth most likely lies somewhere in the middle.