



Commemorating Starvation in the 21st Century

Address given at Quinnipiac University on October 11, 2018

Alex de Waal

The **World Peace Foundation**, an operating foundation affiliated with the Fletcher School at Tufts University, aims to provide intellectual leadership on issues of peace, justice and security. We believe that innovative research and teaching are critical to the challenges of making peace around the world and should go hand-in-hand with advocacy and practical engagement with the toughest issues. To respond to organized violence today, we not only need new instruments and tools—we need a new vision of peace. Our challenge is to reinvent peace.

Alex de Waal is the Executive Director at the World Peace Foundation at The Fletcher School, Tufts University.



World Peace Foundation
at The Fletcher School
Tufts University
169 Holland Street, Suite 209
Somerville, MA 02144 USA



The first American memorial to the 1845-51 famine in Ireland, was designed by the sculptor Maurice Harron and erected on Cambridge Common in 1997. It shows two adults, each holding a child, parting from one another. The plinth has the words 'Never again should a people starve in a world of plenty.'

Notice the importance of that indefinite article: 'a people'.

On that word, hinges much. It signals famine as a collective, national experience, as opposed to hunger as a generic manifestation of poverty. In doing so it also identifies the community that has the authority to narrate its meaning today—a community brought together by common descent from the survivors of that famine.

The figures also indicate the importance of migration and parting—linking the experience of the Irish in Ireland, to the Irish in New England.

It intimates that the famine should be seen as a wrong inflicted, not just a wrong suffered. But the notion that the Irish not only starved, but that they were starved by others, is at best a faint suggestion, and one easily missed.

Memorials and commemorations identify an event, those who are affected by it and—by the process whereby they are designed and built—those who are entitled to define it. They open up the scope for reshaping the meaning of the event and its memory, for the future.

In this lecture, my main contention is that famine memorials have, up to now, focused on starvation in its intransitive sense—as an outcome or an experience. They have not explored how to commemorate starvation in its transitive sense, as something that people do to one another. A memorial or commemoration that tried to evoke starvation as an act—a criminal act no less—would of necessity relate not only to the victims and survivors, but also to the perpetrators, their accomplices, and bystanders. This is a demanding but necessary shift in purpose today, because famine is returning.

In a little known lecture on Soviet policy in Ukraine, given in 1951, Rafael Lemkin wrote of genocide in that nation. Stalin's purges, terror, forced collectivization and mass starvation inflicted during 1932-34 are, he wrote,

'...not simply a case of mass murder. It is a case of genocide, of destruction, not of individuals only, but of a culture and a nation.'

Scholars of genocide and international human rights and humanitarian law tend to read intellectual history backwards and legalistically. Lemkin was the Polish lawyer, author of *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, who coined the term 'genocide' and campaigned tirelessly for it to be recognized as a crime under international law, and prohibited. He used the raw and recent memory to forge an international agenda of law and meaning.

‘...starvation is properly seen as an act, not an outcome.

The 1948 Genocide Convention was indeed the culmination of Lemkin's life's work, albeit with some important shortcomings that he bemoaned. But there is another perspective that is worth exploring.

Lemkin was a romantic nationalist. It is today regarded as a somewhat quaint political philosophy, which essentialises culture and collective identity. Lemkin's notion shares a genealogy with those same concepts of race, against which he fought, which brought Europe to the brink of destruction. However, in Lemkin's writing, the concepts of race, nation and culture are egalitarian. He saw all nations as having equal rights to exist; he challenged any hierarchy according to which one nation might be entitled to dominate another. Thus in his writing on genocide, he defined it first sociologically, seeking to derive a legal formulation from that. Lemkin saw genocide as a two-stage process, first of all the destruction of the national pattern of the targeted national group, and second the imposition of that

of the perpetrator. The colonial conquest and subjugation of the emergent third world, Lemkin argued, contained paradigmatic cases of genocide.

In the case of Ukraine in the early 1930s, Lemkin argued that Stalin's plan, had four prongs:

- Elimination of the intelligentsia: the brain of the nation;
- Elimination of the religious leadership: the soul of the nation;
- Starvation of the masses, and with it elimination of the national spirit;
- Fragmentation and dispersion of the Ukrainian people.

Let me quote what Lemkin had to say about famine:

'The third prong of the Soviet plan was aimed at the farmers, the large mass of independent peasants who are the repository of the tradition, folklore and music, the national language and literature, the national spirit, of Ukraine. The weapon used against this body is perhaps the most terrible of all—starvation.'

The Holodomor has since become an element in the country's self-definition. But I want to focus on three insights, that are implicit the notion of famine as an assault on the collective spirit. Each needs to be elaborated.

.....

The first insight is that starvation *is properly seen as an act, not an outcome*. In cases such as Ukraine, the verb 'to starve' is properly seen as transitive: like torture or rape, it is something that people do to one another. Lemkin wrote extensively on the topic of the deprivation and rationing of food as a means of punishment or slow killing. If we read his seminal book *Axis Rule*, we find that far more detail is expended on providing details of the reduced rations allocated to conquered populations, than on killing squads and gas chambers.

Indeed the Nazis' single biggest project of mass killing was the Hungerplan: the elimination of 30

million people in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union by depriving them of food. It was not, fortunately, carried through to completion, but nonetheless the Nazis murdered about 2.5 million Soviet prisoners of war by this method, along with the siege of Leningrad, which killed 1 million, and the starvation of Ukrainian and southern Russian cities which killed a comparable number, the deaths of 80,000 from hunger in the Warsaw Ghetto, and the starvation deaths of perhaps half a million in Auschwitz. Forcible mass starvation is difficult to achieve expeditiously and at scale, and when the quotas for the elimination of so-called 'useless eaters' proved difficult to reach, the Nazis turned to quicker methods.

Had the Nazis persisted, however, one outcome might well be that the Hungerplan would have become the signal atrocity of the 20th century, dominating our collective imaginations, and mass starvation would have been criminalized.

Starvation had utility for the Nazis. As indeed it had for colonizers before and since. Acts of colonial conquest, subjugation and extraction had created famine, from the East India Company in Bengal in the 1770s through the American settlers' use of hunger to expropriate Native American lands, through the British concentration camps in South Africa. The 1863 Lieber Code that regulated the conduct of the Union armies during the Civil War infamously provided that:

'It is lawful to starve the hostile belligerent, armed or unarmed, so that it leads to the speedier subjection of the enemy.'

In his 1906 *Handbook for Small Wars*, Colonel Sir Charles Callwell advised his fellow officers that pacification operations would likely involve confiscating cattle and burning villages, 'an aspect that may shock the humanitarian.'

The locus classicus of colonial genocide by starvation is the German eradication of the Herero in south-west Africa in 1904. In response to an uprising against imperial rule, the German military commander ordered that the Herero people in their entirety be driven into the desert, where

about 40,000 died of hunger and thirst.

A small stone in the desert marks this crime.

The maritime powers that prevailed over the Axis in 1945 had their honed their practices of using starvation in war. The British infamously cranked up the blockade of Germany following the Armistice of 1918, with the intent of forcing the defeated country to submit to the onerous terms of the Peace of Versailles, costing many scores of thousands of lives of German children. The raw and recent memory of that suffering and its consequences encouraged Germans—most infamously Adolf Hitler—to see national food security through the possession of agricultural land as a precondition for prevailing in any future war.

In 1941 the Allied blockade of Greece caused a famine. And in July and August 1945, as the Nuremberg Charter for the prosecution of leading Nazis for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and crimes against peace, was being drafted, and the United States was preparing for a protracted war against Japan, the USAAF was dropping mines into Japanese harbours to inhibit any sort of trade in an operation they candidly called 'Operation Starvation.'

We should not be surprised that starvation crimes barely made it to the charge sheet in Nuremberg.

Subsequently, colonial counter-insurgency, intended to keep colonial territories under metropolitan rule, could serve as a handbook for how to create a famine. Lt. Gen. Sir Harold Briggs, Director of Operations for the British in Malaya in 1951, used the term 'Operation Starvation' for his project of denying food to the Communist guerrillas. In 1964, Colonel Roger Trinquier, advisor to the French war efforts in Vietnam and Algeria, wrote that it was necessary to 'make the ground unsuitable' for the guerrilla:

'Anything that could facilitate the existence of the guerillas in any way, or which could conceivably be used by them - depots, shelters, caches, food crops, houses, etc. - must be systematically destroyed or brought in.

All inhabitants and livestock must be evacuated from the [guerrillas'] refuge area. When they leave, the intervention troops must not only have destroyed the [guerrilla] bands, but must leave behind them an area empty of all resources and absolutely uninhabitable.'

Contemporary counter-insurgency may not be so different.

.....

The second latent insight in Lemkin's formulation is that mass starvation is not just an instrument of killing individuals in large numbers, but of killing a way of life. We can be more specific. Famine in an agrarian society is a threat to a peasant political economy, which we must understand to include a collective value system.



Alex de Waal, Quinnipiac University (Bridget Conley/World Peace Foundation2018)

This is something I studied more than thirty years ago in my fieldwork during and after the famine of 1984-85 in Darfur, Sudan. In trying to make sense of how villagers and livestock herders responded to that famine, how they formulated what were called at the time 'survival strategies', it became clear to me that their priority was to preserve their way of life.

I began my fieldwork with the implicit hypothesis that people afflicted by famine would do all that they could to preserve their lives, and the lives of their children—who were of course especially at risk. And of course they did search for food, and seek medical help for the sick. But they were of-

ten very fatalistic about their chances of preserving life. They saw the odds of surviving or dying as something of a lottery, or as being in the hands of God. Which was in many ways rational because the infectious diseases that were the proximate cause of death in most cases were not subject to individuals' control, or even mitigation.

What people were not fatalistic about, and to the contrary were extremely thoughtful and proactive about, was their livelihoods and their social networks. Their responses to the threat of famine and the stresses of famine made sense if we understood that their priority was to sustain a dignified way of life that allowed them an element of autonomy, sustainability and social respect.

In the immediate aftermath of that famine, what was most striking was the extent to which people had survived. The enormous death toll that had been predicted—half a million or more—had not materialized. The best estimates for the excess deaths were about 100,000, a terrible toll, but many fewer than the catastrophic expectations.

Over the following years, however, what gradually became clear was the wider and deeper societal damage inflicted by the famine. People had survived, but the collective aim of keeping their society intact, with its cherished values of reciprocity between farmers and herders, and the coexistence of different ethnic groups sharing the land, had not been achieved. The impoverishment and migration of the famine years, the indignities and inhumanities that undermined families, took their toll on the social fabric. In other famines in such societies—including in other parts of Sudan—famine was followed by carpet baggers and land grabbers, who moved in to profit from the misery. Capitalists and government officials, hand in glove, dragged villagers through the mangle of modernity to create an agricultural proletariat working for wages on the land they had formerly cultivated as their own. That is the standard track for societal transformation accelerated by hunger.

But Darfur was too far away and too remote to be of interest to Sudan's merchant farmers. Instead it became prey to proxy warriors from the neigh-

bouring countries of Libya and Chad, a sideshow of the Cold War sideshow that was the French-American covert war to punish and contain Colonel Gaddafi, left to fester for fifteen years until it ultimately erupted as a war in its own right, its savagery wholly disproportionate to the ostensible political stakes of the Sudanese protagonists, whether rebels or government.

The Darfur famine of 1984-85 was neither engineered nor desired by the Sudanese government. The president of the day, Jaafar Nimeiri was responsible for failed economic policies that had bankrupted the country, but he was not responsible for the severe drought that coincided with the severe economic recession and debt crisis. However, Nimeiri didn't care: he was more concerned with his own political survival than with the lives and livelihoods of the poor and drought-afflicted people of his peripheral provinces, and he refused to mobilize his government—which had considerable expertise in relief operations—or to call for international aid. For sure, he was culpable.

A famine that followed a few years later, in southern Sudan, had a different mix of features. This was a counter-insurgency famine, brought about by the scorched earth policy of a vicious militia war against the rebellious southern Sudanese. It was visibly different in its effects. Whereas the Darfurian villagers during the drought had been able to sell their assets, albeit at firesale prices, to buy food, the southern Sudanese had lost all their possessions to savage raiding by militiamen. Whereas the Darfurians had been able to gather wild foods, wander from village to village seeking charity or paid labour, or find better-off relatives in the towns, the displaced southern Sudanese were denied all these means of surviving. As a consequence, while the death rate of the Darfurians during the 1984 famine went up by a factor of about 2.5, for the displaced southern Sudanese in the summer of 1988, the death rate went up by about 100, sometimes 200. It was as much as two orders of magnitude worse. And whereas Darfurian children had died from the effects of infectious diseases working on malnourished bodies, southern Sudanese children and adults literally starved to death.

This was starvation as policy. It was a deliberate act that led my colleague David Keen to write a book entitled *The Benefits of Famine*, and led me to write that the verb to starve is a transitive and criminal. But it was similar to the Darfur famine in two respects: it was an assault on a way of life, and the societal destruction it brought in its wake contributed to a deep and protracted social crisis in southern Sudan, which was in turn the troubled inheritance of the independent nation of South Sudan, born a quarter of a century later.

One of the first visitors to the camps for the displaced, starving southern Sudanese fleeing the famine zone, was the journalist Deborah Scroggins. After returning to her hotel in Khartoum she describes how she stared at her typewriter for a long time before beginning finally to write. She wrote, 'These are places so sad that the mind grows queasy trying to understand them.'

.....

In *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin quoted a hauntingly similar line from Flaubert: 'Few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage.'

Like Rafael Lemkin, Walter Benjamin was keenly aware that the march of European fascism was carrying the baton of colonialism, differing mainly in that the Nazi battalions were now trampling over Europe itself, because the territories of the rest of the world were already conquered, and there wasn't enough land on the planet to satisfy imperial greed.

Benjamin wrote that it is the duty of the historian to wrest the narrative of history away from the march of the victor, to imagine the alternative futures that would have been possible had the vanquished survived. This is not only imagining the un-lived lives of the aggregate of those who died, but also, in his words, 'brushing history against the grain': imagining the alternative societies that they might have sustained created. Benjamin writes,

'Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the

enemy if he wins.’

I am reminded of Benjamin’s words, reading the publications of a colleague, a social anthropologist who first travelled to Yemen in 1971. She is Martha Mundy, professor emeritus at the LSE. Most recently she has been collecting data on the bombardment of civilian targets in Yemen by the aircraft of the Saudi-Emirati coalition, supported with arms, technicians and diplomatic cover by the American, British and French governments. On October 9, 2018, we at the World Peace Foundation published a report on aerial bombardment and the food war in Yemen that she had written.



Yemen/UNHCR 2017

Martha Mundy’s presentation begins with a time when Yemen was nearly self-sufficient in food; when agriculture and fishing were thriving, when people preferred to eat what had been grown locally rather than acquiring a taste for imported wheat, when the skills for maintaining complex irrigation and terracing systems were both prized. That is a world that is on the brink of being lost, not only in the current harrowing of the country, but also more gradually in the attrition of the intervening decades during which Yemenis have become subordinate to the oil economies of the Gulf.

Summon up an image of the Yemen famine and it will be an image of an arid landscape, the trees cut down, the water gone, the land stony. We tend to think of such aridity as the cause of famine, but actually that desert is man-made, it is the outcome of the same process of societal destruction that has contributed to the famine, to the extent that the

two—desertification and hunger—are now locked together in an embrace.

Yemen today is, I suggest, the defining famine crime of our generation.

The necessary prologue to the story of this famine is the sadness of seeking to resuscitate the lost Yemen, with its once bright hopes for its own future. But the main drama is the active, deliberate and relentless destruction of a country under the rubric of counter-insurgency.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman launched his war in Yemen three and a half years ago, on the grounds that a rebellion by the Houthi minority was actively backed by Iran and was thereby an imminent threat to Saudi Arabia. In doing so he misrepresented and exaggerated, for the purpose of his consolidation of power in his own kingdom. In this war of choice, Saudi Arabia was joined by the United Arab Emirates and subsequently by Sudan, Eritrea and Jordan; it has also hired mercenaries.

The strategy of the coalition campaign against Yemen could have been lifted from a colonial blueprint: the aircraft strike military and civilian targets in equal measure, including among the latter: agricultural extension offices, irrigated farms, fishing ports and fishing boats, clinics and hospitals, markets and roads. The artisanal fishing on the Red Sea coast, formerly a major source of livelihood—fish exports used to be Yemen’s second biggest earner after oil—is now almost totally at a standstill. The bombing raids are augmented by a blockade, which includes commercial food imports in a country that was, immediately prior to the war, dependent on such imports for 80 percent of its grains. It is also amplified by an economic war, which involved moving the Central Bank from Houthi-controlled Sana’a to Aden, and halting all payments of salaries to civil servants.

More than a million people have suffered cholera in by far the worst epidemic of modern times. The air strikes have destroyed at least one cholera treatment centre.

Yemen was poor, dependent on food imports and aid, with water scarcity, before the war. These facts were known to those who initiated the war, and who have sustained it.

‘ But the famine is a foreseeable outcome of the way in which the war is conducted, and they have taken no significant steps to change that. They are still culpable.

The intent of the perpetrators of the famine in Yemen may not be to starve the Yemeni people to death. Most likely it is not. But the famine is a foreseeable outcome of the way in which the war is conducted, and they have taken no significant steps to change that. They are still culpable.

.....

It is the readiness to see human lives as expendable in pursuit of other political and military goals that is the common factor in the resurgence of famine in the last two years.

After three decades in which famines had declined in number and lethality almost to vanishing point, the last two years have seen their return. In 2017, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) spoke of the ‘four famines’: north-eastern Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. Properly they should have spoken of five, including the starvation sieges in Syria, but Syria was excluded on the technicality that the process whereby food insecurity is measured and famine is declared—the Integrated food security Phase Classification scale—relies on the collection of data for mortality and malnutrition, that are not collected by the designated agencies in Syria.

The IPC scale also has an unfortunate and unintended methodological shortcoming, which is that the progression through each stage of food insecurity, to stage 4 (emergency) and stage 5 (famine) is calculated on the basis of how severely a geographical locale is stricken. That locale can be quite small, which means that relatively confined severe crises—such as occurred in parts of north-eastern

Nigeria and South Sudan in 2016 and 2017—warrant the designation ‘famine’, but a much wider food crisis, affecting millions, for which we don’t have the required data to designate any one locale as hit in this manner, escapes that label.

The famine declaration in South Sudan in 2017 was based on the horrendous situation prevailing in just two counties. Starvation and related diseases killed perhaps 1500 people over those few months of outright famine. However, a recent analysis of hundreds of field reports by the demographer Francesco Checchi concludes that, since the crisis began almost five years ago, the total excess mortality in South Sudan has been about 383,000. In focusing exclusively on the severity of hunger in one location, the IPC process didn’t capture the scale and persistence of the suffering of the South Sudanese.

We face an even more difficult diagnosis in Yemen: we can be sure that this is a killing famine, but we don’t have the data to make the authoritative call. The lack of data is not an accident. The same faminogenic conduct of war by the Saudi-Emirati coalition that has created the famine, which includes severe restrictions on humanitarian agencies supplying food and sending in their personnel, means that the requisite information is not being collected and analyzed. It seems likely that we won’t know the scale of the Yemen famine until nutritionists and demographers are able to reconstruct the calamity afterwards.

In each of the five famines, western countries have a dishonourable role.

In north-eastern Nigeria, the counter-insurgency led by the Nigerian army has surrounded an area with a population of more than 900,000 people. Food is not allowed in. The insurgent group, Boko Haram, is designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S., which means that under the Patriot Act it is a criminal act to provide the insurgents with any material support—and that would include any amount of humanitarian relief, however small, that it could purloin from the civilian population. The priority of the counter-insurgents—Nigeria, Chad, and the U.S.—is something other than preventing

or relieving famine.

The same was true in Somalia in 2011: the Patriot Act was enforced while the country descended into a well-predicted and well-monitored famine. In that case, supplies of American food aid that had helped sustain the country for years were dramatically cut back, even while the UN's early warning indicators for famine were flashing red. The U.S. Treasury, which administers the financial sanctions required by the Patriot Act, only found the means for a 'humanitarian workaroud' when the UN declared 'famine'. By this time famine mortality was peaking. About 250,000 Somalis, most of them children, died. There were many causes of this famine: drought, high global food prices, conflict, corruption, and war, alongside the cutback in aid. But it was nonetheless a preventable disaster. The priority of the counter-terrorists was something other than preventing or relieving famine.

In South Sudan and in Syria, the principal culprits for famine crimes are the governments of those countries, with commanders in the field doubtless exercising much discretion in the extent to which they enforce starvation, or provide latitude for trapped people to escape, or receive aid. In both cases, western countries could have done more, or done things differently: their priorities have been other than ending the wars and famines.

Yemen, however, stands out, because the threads of culpability lead not only to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, but to the western capitals that sustain the armies and air forces of those countries, and which cooperate in enforcing the blockade. Those western capitals are Washington DC, London and Paris. Yemen is different because the western failure is not primarily a failure of providing relief aid, but rather they are complicit in a war, including an economic war, that is deliberately, actively and predictably starving a country.

Some famines have clear utility to those that perpetrate them, others come about because those with power simply don't care. Yemen falls into the second category. Those with power will come to care, but then it will be too late. Perhaps this will happen when the torn social fabric of that country

generates a crisis of mass migration towards Europe and the Gulf. As the Irish in New England remind us, the biggest demographic impact of mass starvation is sometimes mass exodus. Perhaps it will be when the shockwaves of the war cross the Red Sea and destabilize the Horn of Africa; perhaps when it generates a new form of desperate militancy.

The Saudi-Emirati famine crime in Yemen is not only causing deaths on a scale, of which at the moment we have no good figures, but also destroying the fabric of a nation. Famine is an attack on the spirit of a society.

In May this year, when the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Nikki Haley was signing resolution 2417 on armed conflict and hunger, and condemning the Syrian government's starvation sieges, she was doing and saying nothing of substance to rein in America's close allies who are perpetrating starvation in Yemen.

As Walter Benjamin memorably observed, 'There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.'

.....

'Never again should a people starve in a world of plenty.'

The first memorial to the victims of famine in Ireland was designed by Edward Delaney and erected in St. Stephen's Green in Dublin in 1967. That was 115 years after the end of the starvation. That long delay is significant.

Starvation is a uniquely demoralizing crime for its victims. This is because the ultimate perpetrators are remote, while the indignities and cruelties are intimate and immediate.

In a famine crime, the causal chain from perpetrator to victim can be long and obscure. One of the reasons why prosecutors in war crimes trials have been hesitant to pursue starvation charges is their view—in my view mistaken—that if they cannot prove that particular individuals died of starvation because of the specific actions of an individual

perpetrator, then the charge of starvation cannot be made to stick. And with the exception of penal starvation—depriving prisoners of what is necessary to sustain life—it is extraordinarily difficult to prove. Lemkin’s response to this problem was to subsume the crime of famine within the crime of genocide, which is a crime defined by the intent of the perpetrator. In the case of genocide, this has generated its own set of problems, which I will not discuss.

In the case of starvation, considered separate from genocide, proving the necessary intent should be much simpler. All that is needed is to demonstrate the combination of two things: that food deprivation occurred, and that there was criminal intent by those doing the depriving. The appropriate language is provided in Article 54 of the Second Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions of 1977.

1. Starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited.
2. It is prohibited to attack, destroy, remove or render useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works, for the specific purpose of denying them for their sustenance value to the civilian population or to the adverse Party, whatever the motive, whether in order to starve out civilians, to cause them to move away, or for any other motive.

Additional Protocol I applies only to international armed conflicts. But the principle is clearly articulated and can be extended to civil wars and internationalized civil wars, such as Yemen. Similar language is found in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), covering international armed conflicts, and by implication the same prohibition should extend to non-international armed conflicts.

Nonetheless, prosecutors at the ICC and special courts have not, with rare exceptions, prosecuted starvation crimes. This is a shortcoming that can

be overcome, if we care to do so.

.....

If the perpetrator of starvation is typically remote, the experience of famine is visceral, domestic, intimate, and local.

Famine is an experience that people want to forget. It is long and miserable, and every day brings painful and degrading choices. Parents must allocate their few crumbs of food among their children, and may have to choose which ones are fed and which ones are not. They must choose which sick child



The Cambridge Common Irish Famine Memorial (Bridget Conley/ World Peace Foundation 2018).

will get medicine, and which will have to wait in the hope that she gets better without it. People fight for a place in line to receive rations; they degrade themselves to earn a meal. Those who are slightly better off will buy up their neighbours’ cows or sheep for a pittance, or take their land or houses, or take their daughters for the night. Unspeakable social taboos are violated.

In any famine, the threads of causation are many and tangled. Those in authority—from self-interest or from confusion—will select some threads and not others for the story they choose to tell. Typically they will draw out the unfortunate weather, the ill luck of crop or livestock disease, or the fecklessness of the peasants. Followers of Thomas Malthus will blame the irresponsible profligacy of the victims for having been born in the first place, thereby creating an imbalance between human population and productive land. Some will see the

hand of Providence.

And it will take time for these threads to fade and others—the human agency, the societal engineering, the brutal intent of the rulers—to be recognized.

That time may be a long time indeed.

After 85 years, the Ukrainians are commemorating the Holodomor. But, for reasons that are not hard to appreciate, the Russian Permanent Representative at the UN Security Council steadfastly resisted a proposal, put forward by the Netherlands, for the Council to recognize the link between armed conflict and hunger. The Russians finally relented and UN Security Council resolution 2417 was passed unanimously in May this year. But its language is confined to reiterating the prohibitions that already exist in international humanitarian law, albeit with some important clarifications and a higher level of attention to the issue.

After 75 years, the economic explanations for the Bengal famine of World War Two—authored by some of the most liberal and humane economists in the world, such as Amartya Sen—are at last being supplemented by accounts that explain how it was that the British authorities administered the economy in such a way as to create the scarcity and then prolong it. The poets, novelists, sculptors and photographers of Bengal recognize and commemorate the famine in their work. But there is no official memorial. The most likely reason is that the leaders of the Indian Congress Party in Calcutta chose not to challenge the British at the time, because of the prospect of more speedily achieving independence through loyal cooperation in the war effort—a war effort that was also providing handsome profits to the city’s industrialists. And once again, we see how the social trauma brought about by famine led to another, more violent trauma—in this case the Calcutta riots that played a huge role in the partition of India.

There is no public monument to the famine in Calcutta or Dhaka. And there is of course no memorial in London. The great famine of 1770 in Bengal, wrought by the East India Company, is not com-

memorated at the site of the company’s former headquarters in Leadenhall Street—unless one counts the skeletal Lloyds building that now occupies the site as an unwitting tribute to the starvation. The 1943 famine is nowhere acknowledged at the building that then housed the India Office and is now the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The naming of famines is important. In May, I spoke at the annual commemoration of the Great Irish Famine, held this year at University College Cork. I proposed that it should be more correctly named, the ‘Great English Famine in Ireland’. Because there is no tracing of the responsibility for this famine that does not involve an unbreakable thread that leads to London.

‘ Not only a tribute, a memorial to Britain’s famine victims would contribute to a national conversation on Britain’s historical place in the world.

Renaming the famine in this manner—or at least debating how it should be named—and erecting a permanent memorial in London close to the place whence the starvation was administered would, I submit, imbue the memory of the event with new meaning.

Memorials to the immeasurable sadness of famine in Ireland, and poetry and art in India, are part of the script of those countries’ decolonization. But the famines in those countries are not yet part of *Britain’s* national story. Not only a tribute, a memorial to Britain’s famine victims would contribute to a national conversation on Britain’s historic place in the world.

.....

Across North America there are memorials to Ireland’s hunger and famine. They commemorate past evil in a country far away; they affirm the virtuousness of America and redemption through migration to America; they warn that the task of conquering famine requires us to be vigilant. They are moving, and they enlist the solidarity of the visitor. They have evolved from more traditional

figurative depictions of the suffering, to works that ask more searching questions of the visitor.

Brian Tolle's memorial in New York, a gently sloping quarter acre of land with a ruined cottage, surrounded by the towers of lower Manhattan, within sight of the grandeur of the 9/11 Memorial, next to the quays, squeezed between Au Bon Pain and a shopping mall, can oblige the visitor to ask penetrating questions. Like some of the simple Celtic crosses in the stark valleys of the west of Ireland, it reminds us that these are landscapes not empty, but emptied.

We don't yet, however, have a memorial specifically to starvation—the act of starvation. Existing memorials bring together a community of the descendants of survivors and those who stand in solidarity with them. But they don't provoke a conversation with those who inherit the mantle of the perpetrators, who still have the exorbitant privilege of forgetting.

Today's memorials tend to be a focus for comfort, rather than posing the most difficult questions. They appeal to our sense of social justice and call for our philanthropy, tracing the threads from historic famine crimes to contemporary hunger. Everywhere and anywhere, hunger is an affront, but its very generality dilutes the need for a pointed critique. There is a universal right to food, but proclaiming that right doesn't make the powerful shudder, or pose truly painful choices for the comfortable.

Current memorials were built with an implicit confidence in the future, expecting that the arc of history is bending towards justice and prosperity. In an era in which famines are returning, because political leaders don't care enough about human life to take the elementary steps to prevent or prohibit starvation, the famine memorial needs to sting more.

How to commemorate famine in an era when we seem prepared to tolerate starvation, I suggest, is a conversation that is needed today.

For information on World Peace Foundation's program on Famine, visit us at www.Worldpeacefoundation.org.