



# WHAT EVERYONE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT FAMINE

When one hears the word “famine” today, the typical image thought of is poor Africans dying as result of a natural disaster such as drought.

**But the reality is that all modern famines are man-made.**

Famines are complicated—it takes many factors to create mass starvation. Underlying poverty and disaster often play a role. But in the modern world, political choices are decisive in whether not a famine occurs—how bad it becomes, who starves and who doesn’t.

Humanitarian aid plays an essential role in containing famine, but all modern famines would be avoided if political decision-makers had chosen to respect people’s food security, or in some cases, not intentionally used famine as a weapon of war.

**Famine has perpetrators and those who fall victim are not merely the result of natural calamity or misfortune.**

Intended for a general audience, this resource provides a concise overview of famine and demonstrates how modern famines are man-made and the result of political choices. It consists of three case studies of famine, a review of common myths about famine, a summary of the history and contemporary trends in famine, and a discussion of what can be done about famine today.

# THREE FAMINES

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To illustrate let's take three famines: The Irish Famine, The Nazi Hunger Plan, and Ethiopia in 1983-1985.

## The Irish Famine



The Famine Memorial, Dublin (Ireland)  
Ron Cogswell, May 2018\Flickr

Nineteenth century Ireland was poor, densely populated, and ruled by the British. Most of the country's peasant farmers grew potatoes on small plots of land, leaving them desperately vulnerable should those crops fail—which is what happened when blight struck in September 1845, infesting the potato harvest. Over the next five years, an estimated 1 million Irish died, a majority from starvation and related diseases, and another 2 million emigrated, mostly to the United States. It is sometimes called the 'potato famine' as though the blight alone were responsible. But the crop failure struck much more widely, impacting a number of northern European countries, some more severely, none of which suffered a famine. What made Ireland different? The answer is a combination of poverty and inhumane economic policy.

Poverty made the Irish vulnerable. About a quarter of the population were agricultural workers and their families, some of whom had no land, many of whom had small farms on which they grew potatoes. By mixing wage labor with subsistence farming, landlords could keep daily wages low. The west of Ireland was the poorest, and the worst hit.

What turned a crop failure into a calamitous famine was Great Britain's callous economic policies. Britain, having conquered Ireland in the 1500's and brought it into union in 1801, pursued doctrinaire policies of laissez faire in markets and austerity in public spending on relief. Many Britons also believed that starvation was nature's corrective to what they considered overpopulation and backwardness of the Irish. Ireland didn't lack food: in fact there was grain for export. What the starving lacked was the money to buy it. In thrall to the interests of landowners, who ensured artificially high food prices, the government refused to distribute surpluses to the poor or allow imports of cheap food. The result was malnutrition, starvation, and disease, while much food remained in merchant-owned depots.

Famine relief was administered according to strict principles of minimum cost, and aiding only those in the direst need. Several different relief programs were tried and failed: public works, soup kitchens, and workhouses under the Poor Law. The rations were too low, the local authorities required to implement them were incapable or bankrupt, and insan-

itary workhouses spread disease. The infamous “Gregory Clause” stated that no one who owned more than one-quarter acre of land was entitled to receive relief, forcing the poorest to give up all but a quarter of an acre of their land, leaving them even more impoverished. This was part of a larger pattern of consolidation of landholdings by Irish landlords that the Poor Law was meant to encourage.

The famine not only killed one million people, but also led to the destruction of a traditional way of life. Peasant villages were wiped out; small farms were consolidated into larger ones as thousands of tenant farmers were evicted, and 2 million emigrated.

## The Nazi Hunger Plan

The German Hunger Plan was the largest starvation crime on record. It was enacted by the Nazis in World War II as part of Operation Barbarossa, their invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Barbarossa was the largest land invasion in history, with 4.5 million troops on the offensive. Hitler and the Nazi government saw the operation through the lens of “lebensraum,” or “living space,” believing that the German race needed sufficient land to secure its future survival. The rationale was that after conquering Soviet territory, Germans would settle there at the expense of the current Slavic inhabitants—seen as racially inferior. The Nazis had a simple plan for feeding both its massive Wehrmacht invasion force and ensuring long-term food supply for the home population. Viewing food supply in a zero-sum, Malthusian perspective, they believed that there was not enough food for both Germans and the land’s current inhabitants. Thus, in the lead up to Operation Barbarossa, the German Reich Minister for Food and Agriculture Herbert Backe drew up the Hunger Plan for how food would be diverted from the local populations to German control. It was explicit that millions of Soviet civilians would have to die from famine, with Backe and other Nazi officials estimating that up to 30 million people would need to die of starvation. The logic behind this plan was summarized by Nazi economic planners about one month prior to Operation Barbarossa:

*“As Germany and Europe require surpluses under all circumstances, consumption [in the Soviet Union] must be reduced accordingly... The population of these territories, in particular the population of the cities will have to face the most terrible famine... Many tens of millions of people in this territory will become superfluous and will have to die or migrate to Siberia.”*

There is no precise estimate of deaths resulting from the Hunger Plan, but the minimum number is



“In besieged Leningrad”. Leningradians on Nevsky avenue during the siege/Boris Kudoyarov, 1942

thought to be 4.7 million deaths from hunger, disease, and cold due to Nazi policies. This includes mass annihilation of Soviet prisoners of war, with 2.6 million dying from deliberate starvation and famine-induced diseases. A million died of starvation in the siege of Leningrad, and many hundreds of thousands in cities such as Kharkiv and Kiev.

At the Nuremberg trials after World War II, no Nazi official was charged of starvation crimes on account of the Hunger Plan. This is one reason why this vast atrocity is so little known. But it is a chilling demonstration of how mass famine can be a starvation crime with specific perpetrators.

## Ethiopia 1983-1985



Prison of Hunger, Osama Hajjar, February 2019\ Cartoon Movement

The Ethiopian famine of 1983-1985 is famous in western countries mainly because of the Live Aid concert and Bob Geldolf's song "Do They Know it's Christmas?" Ethiopia suffered numerous famines in the second half of the 20th century, but the most deadly was in 1983-1985. Background causes included poverty, failed economic policies, and, in the short-term, severe drought. However, it was civil war that turned a food crisis into a major famine.

After a revolutionary government known as the Dergue took power in 1973, it faced numerous internal rebellions. The two main ones took place in Tigray and Eritrea, with the first aiming to overthrow the Dergue and the latter to achieve independence. The Dergue's counterinsurgency operations used

food deprivation as a weapon of war, destroying crops in insurgent held regions and blocking aid from reaching these areas. The government used food as an enticement to draw people in insurgent areas to feeding centers from which they were forcibly resettled, depriving the rebels of a population base. The Ethiopian military also diverted crops to feed its troops, even stealing food provided by the World Food Programme. These strategies were explicit government policy, with one official stating in 1984 that "food is a major element in our strategy against the secessionists." Tigray only received 5.6 percent of official international food aid, despite having about one-third of Ethiopia's famine victims. The main relief that reached them was brought by a small clandestine unofficial aid effort, operating across the Sudanese border at night.

By the end of 1985, at least 600,000 Ethiopians died from famine. In 1991, a coalition of rebels overthrew the Dergue and brought an end to major famine. Ethiopia has suffered none near this magnitude since the end of counter-insurgency operations. While there was a large-scale conventional war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998-2000, there was no famine.

## WHAT DO THESE SHOW?

### 1. Each famine is different.

The three cases show that famines are far from monolithic. One difference relates to armed conflict: the Hunger Plan and Ethiopian famine were both in the context of war, while the Irish famine was not. Even in the context of war, the Hunger Plan was a deliberate attempt to eliminate an entire population, while in Ethiopia hunger was used to achieve a limited military objective. The Irish and Ethiopian famines each had economic policy errors as a factor, with the former being laissez-faire ideology and the latter central planning mismanagement. But the Hunger Plan was not simply the result of economic policy, instead extreme nationalist ideology. These cases also show that famines vary in scale, from entire nations to sub-regions within them. Nonetheless, taken together these famines show **(1) famines consistently result from political decisions** and **(2) famine can strike anywhere, and is not simply an African problem.**



Bird of War, Mohsen Zarifian, January 2019\Cartoon Movement

### 2. Famine overlaps with forced starvation; it overlaps with the failure of aid.

The causes of famine vary, as they can be caused by economic policy errors, starvation crimes, and the denial of humanitarian aid. A famine can be caused by one of these factors alone or a combination of them. For example, the Irish famine was caused by both economic policy errors and the denial of humanitarian aid, the Hunger Plan was a combination of multiple starvation crimes, and the Ethiopian famine was a result of scorched earth counterinsurgency and the denial of aid.

# WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON MYTHS ABOUT FAMINE?

## MYTH 1:

**Famine is a shortage of food**



The Indian famine scholar Amartya Sen noted, "Starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough to eat. It is not the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat." This is especially true since the second half of the 20 century when humanitarian aid has become professionalized, so that any humanitarian emergency will only become a famine if aid is denied to a population. Another crucial facet is that famines do not impact all people within a country equally. Typically, the poorest starve while better off people have enough to eat, or even profit. This was shown clearly in Ireland, where no landlord is known to have starved. Similarly, Amartya Sen has documented how the Bengal famine of 1943, Ethiopian famine of 1973, and Bangladesh famine of 1974 all occurred without a decline in national food availability. The current famine crisis in Yemen is mainly due to the lack of money to buy food, not the lack of food itself.

## MYTH 2:

**Famine is a result of natural causes**



In popular consciousness drought is often thought to be the main cause of famine, especially in Africa. While drought sometimes plays a role in creating a food shortage, it does not lead to famine without being exacerbated by political decisions, such as war or the denial of humanitarian aid. This is seen in the Ethiopian famine of 1983-1985, where drought turned into a famine only when hunger was used as a counterinsurgency weapon.

## MYTH 3:

**Overpopulation causes famine**



Conventional wisdom misjudged Ethiopia's 1983-1985 famine not only to drought, but to overpopulation. However, in the past fifty years Ethiopia's population has quadrupled while famine deaths have consistently declined and life expectancy has increased. On a global scale, the world's population increased from 2.5 billion in 1950 to 6.8 billion in 2010, during which time famine deaths have drastically declined.

## MYTH 4:

**Famine is just an African problem**



Famine has killed more people in Asia than Africa. Between 1870-2010, about 73% of famine deaths have been in China, South Asia, and East and Southeast Asia and about 10% in Africa. It is true that a majority of famine deaths since 1983 have been in Africa, but North Korea and Iraq each suffered their own famines in this span. Furthermore, in the 1970's most famine deaths were in Asia and those presently most at risk for famine are in Yemen and Syria.

## MYTH 5:

**Climate change will inevitably lead to famine**



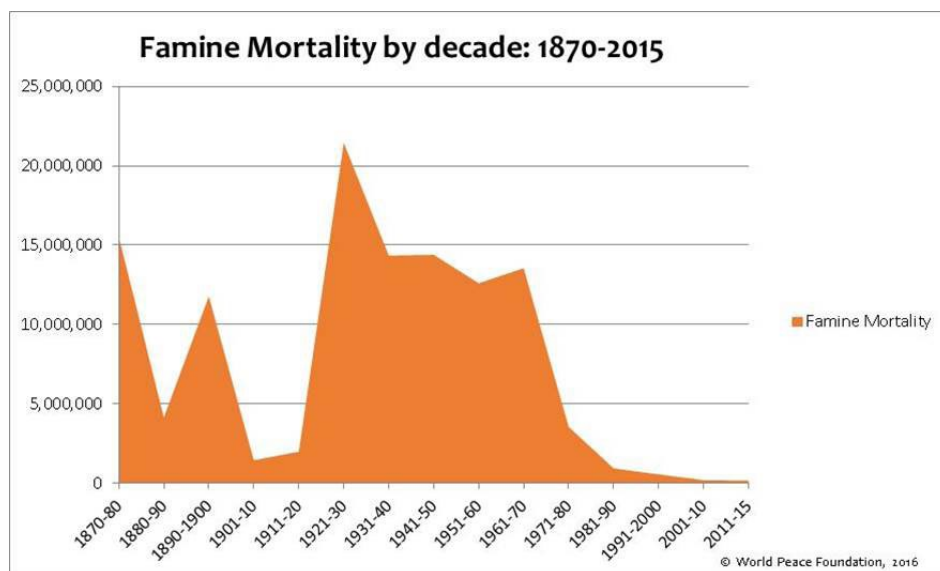
Climate change poses significant dangers to human well-being, including issues of food security. However, believing it will inevitably lead to famine ignores that political decisions are necessary for famine to occur. Increased food prices, drought, and other effects of climate change pose food security risks to vulnerable populations. However, the greatest danger of famine is if political leaders use the reality of climate change to make decisions to deprive others of food, perhaps through war or land seizures. In so far as climate change contributes to war and massacre, it will be through fears -- some exaggerated, some manipulated, but all of them real -- which will then be seized upon by political leaders. The good news then is that the threats posed by climate change have the potential to be constructively managed through political decisions.

# FAMINE YESTERDAY AND TODAY

## WHAT ARE THE TRENDS?

The history of famine since the 19th century can be divided into four stages: European colonialism, the extended world war and interwar period, post-colonial totalitarianism, and a decline since the mid-1980's. There has also been a disturbing resurgence of potential calamitous famines since 2010.

**European colonialism** (1700's and 1800's): Famine was an integral part of European colonialism from the very beginning. The colonial-settler projects of the Americas and Australia used starvation as a weapon against the indigenous inhabitants, resulting in the mass eradication of native peoples. In the 18th and 19th centuries, India and China suffered numerous mass famines as their economies were reoriented to the needs of imperial Europe. The Irish famine of the 1840's was the most deadly in 19th century Europe.



**The extended world war** (1915-1950): The two world wars and the interwar period saw the highest number of famine deaths in modern history, as it was marked by total war and enormous social upheaval. Three-quarters of a million Germans died during and after World War I, due to British blockade. The 1920's post-revolution civil war in Russia and Stalin's collectivization of Soviet agriculture in the 1930's caused close to 10 million famine deaths. In World War II, the Nazi Hunger Plan and Soviet retaliation against German prisoners of war starved close to 6 million. In East Asia, war, drought, and economic crisis led to 11 million Chinese famine deaths between the world wars, with another 6 million victims throughout East Asia during World War II due to Japanese

invasion and occupation.

**Post-colonial totalitarianism** (1950-1985): Since the aftermath of World War II, there have been no famines in Europe. Asia and Africa continued to experience them due to smaller-scale wars and, in Asia, communist economic and political disasters. The worst case of famine in history was caused by Mao ZeDong's "Great Leap Forward" in China from 1958-62, leading to 25-30 million deaths. In Cambodia, Pol Pot's "Year Zero" programs to remake society starved 1.2 million people between 1975-1979, which ended only with the Vietnamese invasion that overthrew him. This marked the end of communist-inspired famine in the 20th century, with the exception of a smaller North Korean famine in the 1990's. Other Asian famines included the 1974 Bangladesh one in the aftermath of its war for independence against Pakistan and the Indonesian military's counterinsurgency famine against East Timor in the 1970's. Africa suffered fewer famines than Asia in this period, with most deaths in Ethiopia, as well as the Biafra famine in the context of the Nigerian Civil War in 1967-1970.

**Decline and Resurgence** (1986-2010): The past thirty years have seen no famines of 1 million or more deaths, as were all too common in the previous two stages. Most of the famines since 1985 were the result of low-level wars in African nations, especially persistent in Sudan/South Sudan, and Somalia. Between 1986-2011, these nations respectively suffered 640,000, and 464,000 famine deaths. The Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda also experienced war-related famines. Other noteworthy famines occurred in Iraq as a result of the first Persian Gulf War and subsequent economic sanctions in the 1990's. The only famine that did not have war as a direct contributing cause was in North Korea in the mid-1990's. Unfortunately, since 2010 the risk of larger-scale famine has increased in places that traditionally have not experienced it. Yemen has seen a proxy war and blockade put 7 million people at risk of famine, according to the United Nations. The Syrian civil war has seen the return of starvation as a weapon in the sieges of major cities. The economic collapses brought about through war and siege make their populations especially vulnerable.

## WHY IS THERE A RESURGENCE?

In 2017, it was estimated that 70 million people worldwide were in acute need of humanitarian assistance, an increase of 25 million people since 2015. Twenty million people were at risk of famine in four countries--, Somalia, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Yemen. This is part of an overall trend since about 2010 in which political actors have chosen to make famine relief secondary to other priorities. What most of today's famines have in common is that there is a "competing policy" that trumps stopping starvation. Somalia is an example, as in 2011-2012 it suffered a famine of at least 244,000 deaths in the context of a counter-insurgency against the al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab. Humanitarian aid was



Al-Shabaab fighters disengage and lay down arms, AMISOM, September 2012[Flickr]

significantly limited because US counter-terror legislation barred relief agencies from engaging in activities that might support groups labeled as “terrorist,” even inadvertently and in tiny amounts. A similar dynamic has been at work in Nigeria, given the counter-insurgency war between the government and the extremist Boko Haram. Both instances demonstrate a higher priority placed on counter-terrorism than famine relief. South Sudan has experienced famine due to civil war since 2013, in which the government has been actively hostile to international relief efforts. The international community is prioritizing ending the famine, but is limited in its actions by the priorities of local political actors. In Syria, multiple political actors prioritize winning a war over stopping famine. This dynamic is also playing out in Yemen, creating the most severe famine crisis in the world today.

## Yemen Today

Since 2015, a devastating war has created a humanitarian disaster in Yemen. According to the United Nations World Food Programme, about 11 million people in Yemen are in acute need of humanitarian aid and are at a major risk of famine. The cause of the famine is not simply a lack of food, as there is food within the country, but rather an economic collapse brought about by the war between Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries and Houthi rebels within Yemen. Mass unemployment puts approximately two-thirds of the population unable to buy sufficient food. Economic collapse is occurring throughout the country, not simply in epicenters of conflict, and has been significantly exacerbated by the Saudi-led blockade of the country. This raises issues of culpability as starvation is a clear consequence of the war and blockade, even if it is not directly intended. In other words, the Saudi-led coalition is prioritizing defeat of the Houthis over the risk of famine.



War Rations, Osama Hajjar, January 2019\Cartoon Movement

Yemen’s pre-war poverty made it especially vulnerable to famine, as it was the poorest country in the Arabian Peninsula and highly dependent on imports of food and fuel. When the Arab Spring spread to Yemen in 2011, the country slowly descended to civil strife. In 2015, Houthi rebels gained in strength and captured the capital Sanaa and northern sections of the country. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) viewed the Houthis as a proxy army for Iran and organized a coalition, including Egypt, Sudan, and Eritrea to defeat the rebellion. Fighting destroyed essential infrastructure, such as the health care system, bombed markets, and disrupted food supplies by eliminating roads and bridges. Trade in some Houthi-controlled territories was brought to a standstill. The blockade worsened the situation, as it imposed a blockade of Yemeni airspace, as well as a naval and land blockade.

Yemen’s GDP declined about thirty-five percent, from US\$13.3 billion in 2014 to US\$8.7 billion in 2015. The government became unable to pay salaries for a large portion of the public sector and resources were unavailable for hospitals and water supplies. In

June 2018, the coalition launched an attack on the port city of Hodeidah, the largest port for entry of goods into rebel-held territory. The greatest risk is that a complete shutdown of the port will lead to further food price increases, especially if overreaction leads to food hoarding, putting food even further out of reach for an already economically devastated population. The issue of competing priorities extends beyond the coalition to the US, which is actively supporting the Saudi and UAE effort through arms sales and logistical support.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT FAMINE TODAY?

- ✓ Reducing wars both between and within nations is of utmost importance, as most famines in the past 30 years have been in the context of armed conflict.
- ✓ Maintaining and continuing the improvement of humanitarian assistance will allow the international community to respond to humanitarian emergencies in the most effective ways. This includes providing aid to civilian populations in times of war, which requires political leaders to always permit humanitarian aid.
- ✓ International law should be strengthened to make the right to food inviolable. All legal steps face limitations, but will contribute to a change in public opinion towards famine.
- ✓ Since people in poverty are the most vulnerable to famine, continuing to raise people out of poverty will decrease the likelihood of famine. One promising approach is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.
- ✓ Addressing wealth inequality within nations will further decrease the vulnerability of destitute populations, so that elites are not hoarding food while at-risk people lack it.
- ✓ There must be an international effort to plan ahead for potential shocks of climate change. Climate change on its own will not lead to famine, but how leaders respond to it could make it more likely.
- ✓ Another global effort is required to rebalance the world food system from luxury foods to staples.
- ✓ **The most important way to address famine today is to make it politically intolerable. Famine must be so morally toxic that it is universally publicly vilified. If mass starvation becomes unthinkable, political and military leaders in a position to inflict it or fail to prevent it, will unhesitatingly ensure that it does not occur, and the public will demand this of them.**

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