

The Irish Potato Famine

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Introduction

Famine is described as a widespread scarcity of food supply, which can be caused by several factors, including diseases, infections, some form of the virus in crops, war, overpopulation, and changes in government policies. The disaster of famine is an alarming situation for every nation because it can lead to the population being vulnerable to infections and diseases, increased death rate, inflation, recession in the economy, a state of panic, and increased emigration from the country.

The Irish Potato Famine, also known as the Great Famine, occurred from 1845 to 1851. The Great Famine, which caused over one million deaths, was a result of the spread of fungus-like organisms called *Phytophthora Infestans*. The fungus initiated the spread of the disease of blight in potatoes and led to over half of the potato crops being damaged in the first, followed by three-quarters of the crops ruined during the seven years of disastrous famine^[1].

What Happened?

The breakout of the virus of *Phytophthora Infestans* resulted in an unfamiliar and unprepared for disease in the crops of Ireland called 'Blight'. Due to Ireland's great dependence on agriculture and the production of potatoes, the spread of blight first affected the supply of potatoes and root vegetables. The spread of blight first alarmed the Irish leaders in 1845, when the supplies of potatoes were decreased by about fifty percent as more than half of the crops were damaged. They soon realized the threat and requested the British government to act upon the worsening situation^[2].

The British government reacted with the repealing of the "Corn Laws," which helped decrease the prices of grains such as corn and maize. However, this did not help the situation because the Irish farmers who were dependent on the production of potatoes suffered from sudden shortages in food supply and couldn't manage to produce enough for their own consumption. This resulted in thousands of farmers dying of starvation, while diseases caused due to malnutrition targeted others^[3].

The country was soon in a state of emergency, where everyone panicked and wished to leave the country. As soon as the second year of failure came upon the Irish people, they found sources to feed themselves in almost anything, including nettles, berries, dandelions, rabbits, cats, and even dogs. The famine was invincible unless large amounts of grains were delivered to the people. Various eyewitnesses and accounts reported that hundreds of people died every day and suffered from extreme starvation, which led them to become weaker.

Millions of people fled the country in hopes of seeking better living standards and opportunities. However, the Irish suffered from a massive failure to emigrate during the famine. Many people died before even reaching their destinations. Others who managed to reach places like the United States of America, Australia, and Canada failed to adjust and suffered from poverty. They were unskilled laborers who were ignorant of the practices of the indigenous people and were easily ostracized^[4].

The famine proved to be the worst in history, as it killed one-eighth of the total Irish population. People starved to death and were made vulnerable to diseases. A small fungus led to one of the most destructive natural disasters in history. However, the famine can't be entirely blamed on the spread of a viral plant infection. The major drivers of the disaster were poor management, ignorance of government, and political factors.

Causes Of The Great Famine (*Why?*)

Population

Ireland's rapidly growing population was an alarming situation, which led to some form of shortage of resources as the country couldn't sustain the number of people that were growing in the area. In a period of ninety years, the population of Ireland increased from 2.5 million to 8 million in the mid-19th century. The country's agricultural land and the endless opportunities for business attracted more population. Moreover, the marriage rate was high during the 1800s. Children became a source of security and income for parents, and there were more helping hands on the farms. A large population that is suddenly attacked by a shortage of food supply is more likely to suffer from famine and difficult to control the damages^[5]

The Dependency On Agriculture

As soon as the potato crop was introduced to the Irish agricultural lands, there was no end to the activity. Millions of people got affiliated with agriculture in some form. About one-third of the population focused on farming and agriculture in the country. Moreover, the Irish people were immensely fond of the potato crop, and most of their food supplies consisted of potato production. It is recorded that fifteen million tonnes of potatoes were consumed by the Irish population during the 1840s. Hence, when the blight hit the potato crops, it caused a huge shortage in the supply of food^[6]

Poor Government

The Irish mismanaged the situation, and the British government became ignorant of the worsening situation of the Irish famine. Exports were still carried out during an alarming state of shortage of food. The people of Ireland could not produce enough to sustain themselves and their economy;

hence, they exported some of the crops and grains. They sold their grains for almost any price so they could generate enough money in the high rates of inflation and recession. Great Britain fed Ireland's limited resources even during the peak of food shortages in the area.

Mismanagement Of Resources

The Irish were never provided with adequate aid by the British government. They lacked the skills or wished to ignore the middle-class Irish people who were hit by a disastrous famine. The British imported Maize from the United States, which contributed little to the starvation but did make a difference in the critical situation. Moreover, things got worse as the farmers could not generate enough to pay their rent, and the landowners were forced to evict the farmers from the land in a situation of famine. This made the lower income group suffer the most from the shortage of food as they lacked all kinds of resources available to them^[7].

Conclusion

The famine proved to be one of the most disastrous events in the history of the United Kingdom, which destroyed the country of Ireland and the people's lives. The famine resulted in reducing the population of Ireland from 8.4 million in 1845 to 6.6 million in 1851. Millions of people lost their lives due to starvation, others were attacked by malnutrition and infections, and some people died during the emigration to other countries.

The famine caused a panic situation in Ireland and the depreciation of the Irish economy. However, the threat of famine and its consequences could be predicted beforehand. Irish farmers depended highly on potatoes, which is why a small disease in these crops led to a shortage of food supplies. On the other hand, the political irresponsibility made the situation worse. When food supplies were imported to Ireland, they should have been protected and equally distributed among the needy and poor Irish people. Instead, Great Britain showed greed and bad decision-making. They continued to export peas, rabbits, grains, meat, and several other food resources.

The Irish took seven years to recover from the famine but lost a lot of resources, economic stability, and, most importantly, millions of lives.

Endnote

1. Donnelly, Jim. "The Irish Famine." BBCi History, January 1 (2001).
2. Keating, John. Irish famine facts. Teagasc, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4, 1996.
3. Bourke, Austin. 'The visitation of god?'The potato and the great Irish famine. Lilliput Press Ltd, 1993.
4. Gráda, Cormac Ó., and Kevin H. O'Rourke. "Migration as disaster relief: Lessons from the Great

- Irish Famine." *European Review of Economic History* 1, no. 1 (1997): 3-25.
5. AMERICA, ARRIVAL IN. "GREAT IRISH FAMINE."
 6. Boyle, Phelim P., and Cormac Ó. Grádo. "Fertility trends, excess mortality, and the Great Irish Famine." *Demography* 23, no. 4 (1986): 543-562.
 7. O'grada, Cormac. *The great Irish famine*. Vol. 7. Cambridge University Press, 1995.
 8. Donnelly, Jim. "The Irish Famine." *BBCi History*, January 1 (2001). ↑
 9. Keating, John. *Irish famine facts*. Teagasc, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4, 1996. ↑
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 11. Gráda, Cormac Ó., and Kevin H. O'Rourke. "Migration as disaster relief: Lessons from the Great Irish Famine." *European Review of Economic History* 1, no. 1 (1997): 3-25. ↑
 12. AMERICA, ARRIVAL IN. "GREAT IRISH FAMINE." ↑
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 14. O'grada, Cormac. *The great Irish famine*. Vol. 7. Cambridge University Press, 1995. ↑