

The Great Hunger

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Time after time, again and again starvation hits the headlines. Yet no matter how catastrophic the event, we never seem to get any nearer to stopping it once and for all. Why is that? Yet this inexcusable mass murder has not always been limited to the Third World, it has happened a lot closer to home...it's just that they never made a big thing of it in history because...well, it's a lot closer to home.

And it happened for **exactly** the same reasons that it still goes on today.

Here we look at the history of the Great Irish Hunger. So, eyes down for a history lesson. And fuck you Live Aid.

One Mighty Blow

150 years ago black patches began to appear on the potato plants grown in Ireland. This was the first appearance of the infamous potato blight which led to a series of crop failures between 1846 and 1848.

In turn, these crop failures started a chain of events which led to the halving of the entire population of Ireland by starvation, disease or emigration. Nearly everybody willing to discuss these events agree that they have had a drastic and long-lasting effect on Irish culture, yet almost nobody in the capitalist media and cultural establishment discuss their meaning.

This article argues that this silence is a guilty silence.

False Claims

In December 1845 the Tory leader Benjamin Disraeli attacked the early reports of the effects of the potato crop failure, calling it a 'false famine'. Ironically despite his anti-Irish intent, Irish historians have agreed with him. Although the events of 1845–48 are officially known as the 'Great Irish Potato Famine', Irish historians and activists concerned with the truth prefer to call it "An Gorta Mor" – The Great Hunger.

The difference in name is to emphasise a radically different view of why over a million Irish men, women and children ended up dying from starvation, cholera and typhus. The official British version is that this was a famine caused by a crop failure – a natural disaster, or in insurance business speak, "an Act of God".

The dissenting view from Ireland is that this was not a natural disaster but a politically motivated act of conscious mass murder.

During the whole period from 1845–1848 while millions of Irish people perished from starvation related diseases, Irish and British landlords continued to collect rent and taxes from the Irish and export corn, vegetables and beef from their land. The so-called famine was not a general failure of the agricultural harvest in Ireland, but simply one of a single crop; the potato.

As some historians have pointed out, the reason why so many died was that a large percentage of the population had been pushed into dependence on one crop, the potato. What the historians are not so open about, is why so many were pushed into this situation.

Some people argue that the growth of the population was responsible, regurgitating the old Malthusian bullshit theory (see below). Others point out that the main reason is that more and more land was being taken from the peasant people by fair means or foul (mostly foul), forcing the majority of the population to rely on a smaller and smaller proportion of Ireland's land.

The Role of the Spud

The land seized by the landlords (many of the biggest being absentee English landlords or corporations) was used to grow food for export to Britain — vegetables, grain and increasingly, beef. Forced onto less and less land the Irish peasantry was forced to grow the most efficient food crop which was the potato, originally imported from South America by the English.

But why, when Ireland was then a province of the largest and richest empire in human history so far, was it not possible to bring in food from the plentiful supplies elsewhere in the world?

In fact in 1845 the Tory Prime Minister Peel did (quietly) make a start on setting up stockpiles of Indian corn to cope with the food shortages. In 1846 the Tories were defeated and replaced by the Whigs led by Lord John Russell. Russell sold the stockpiles and refused to take any government-funded action to either restrict the export of corn from Ireland or import replacement supplies.

Malthus — Guru of Mass Murder

In order to understand the true horror of what Russell did we have to look at his politics and the context of class struggle in which they were formed.

Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834) was an Anglican minister who became best known for his theory of population first released as an argumentative pamphlet in 1798 (1798 was also the year that French Revolutionary troops landed in Killala Bay to support the United Irishmen republican uprising).

His theory, which he spent the rest of his life desperately trying to find evidence to support, was that population growth was geometric (ie 2,4,8,16,32,64,128...) whereas the growth in food production was only arithmetic (ie 2,4,6,8,10,12,14...). Following this argument, population growth was bound to outstrip food production, and as a consequence, population had to be limited either by “moral restraint”, vice, or misery.

By vice, Malthus meant prostitution, abortion, infanticide and the use of whatever contraception existed at the time. By misery, he meant the traditional “horsemen of the Apocalypse” — war, famine and plague.

Underneath all the polite talk, Malthus’ basic theory was that “the poor” (that’s us folks!) were poor because they had far too much sex and too many children. He basically believed that only the rich and middle class had the strength to be “morally self disciplined” about not having children. The vast majority of others were therefore doomed to have their numbers limited by war, famine and plague.

Immoral Earnings

Malthus was the first person to be appointed as a professor of Political Economy. His post was created for him by the East India Company who had founded their own college in England.

As Professor he was the chief justifier of the imperialist activities of the East India Company. His pamphlet was hugely popular amongst the English boss class. It was also originally written as an attack on William Godwin’s writings in support of the French Revolution, and the anarchist idea that the source of poverty was social institutions and that there was enough resources for everyone to have what they wanted after a social revolution.

But Malthus' counter-attack was not in any way scientific or rational — it was simply class prejudice, fear of revolution and old Puritan anti-Catholic crap wrapped up in new clothes. Although in coded form, it is clear that this division between the minority able to exercise “moral restraint” and the rest destined to face the culling force of misery, was merely the old division between the power holders and the rest of us.

In the end, Malthus was convinced, the numbers of the poor would be limited by famine which “with one mighty blow, levels the population with the food of the world”.

There is not enough room here to go through the frantic history of the class struggle from 1800 up until 1846 in detail. But to understand the minds of the incoming Whig government in 1846 a brief outline is needed.

During the Napoleonic Wars, the Tories had been forced to keep much of the army at home to keep down the revolution. The Whigs decided to ride the working class struggle to power by campaigning for reforms of the political system. They made much of the Peterloo massacre and even partly helped to finance and arm “physical force” class fighters to put the shits up the Tories.

Having ridden the struggle to power at the start of the 1830s, the Whigs made the changes they wanted in the 1832 Reform Act. When the working class realised they had been ripped off by the Whigs they began to gather around the Chartist campaign, many of whose leaders were Irish like Fergus O'Connor and Bronterre O'Brien. In desperation, the Whigs attempted a parliamentary pact with the leader of the Irish parliamentarians campaigning for repeal of the Union — Daniel O'Connell.

The Whigs ended up being squeezed between two fronts and lost power in 1841 as a combination of armed Chartist uprisings in Bradford and Newport, and O'Connell withdrawing support in Parliament after being pissed around for too long. The Tory Peel government came in 1841 with a simple program: repression by brute force and ignorance. Peel's new force, the 'Peelers' (Britain's first police force) spent the next few years, particularly in the North, “fighting for our lives” as one police historian put it.

But Peel's police were unpopular not only with the working class people hunting them down in the streets, but also with the vote-holding bosses who were supposed to pay for them. Open class war in the streets not only frightened the bosses, it was costing them money as well. This was the background against which Lord John Russell, descendent of one of Cromwell's lieutenants, became Prime Minister in 1846.

Like many bosses he saw the crisis of working class opposition as being caused by leaders and “outside agitators”. Everywhere Russell turned were these ‘outside agitators’ — the Irish, fought by his Puritan fathers. Russel was going to have to find a solution to this ‘Irish Problem’, and preferably one which, unlike Peel's invention of the cops, didn't cost too much money. Also he'd already tried concessions and temporary deals which had cost the Whigs their power. This time they wanted a more permanent solution.

Exaggeration

O'Connell had been making passionate speeches in the Commons warning of a catastrophe if nothing was done. The British media and politicians united in reviling him and claiming that the problem was exaggerated. Meanwhile Irish men, women and children were already dropping dead from the ‘exaggeration’ all over Ireland.

Although the blight had appeared in 1845 the failure of that year's harvest was not total and was not much worse than the occasional bad harvest. But the failure in 1846 was total. All over Ireland the potato plants were consumed into a foul mush which turned the fields black while the potatoes rotted in the ground. The scenes of devastation recorded by writers around the country read like a vision of damnation. The Catholic Church later cynically argued that it was exactly that.

Meanwhile, Russel's Whigs could well see that the potato crop failure represented an opportunity to bring the Irish into line once and for all. One of the first things Russell had done when coming to power in 1846 was to change the Poor Law as it applied in Ireland so as to make poor relief the sole responsibility of the Irish landowners, from which class O'Connell and his followers came.

Killing Two Birds

The aim was to kill two birds with one stone — to either bankrupt O'Connell and the rest of his class, or at least get the poor to blame them for not saving them, while also distracting attention from Russell's paymasters: the absentee English landlords and London corporations.

The next elections for the Irish Westminster seats were coming up in Summer 1847 and Russell wanted to win them from O'Connell and his party. To that end cosmetic efforts at famine relief including soup kitchens were publicly started by Russell.

Charity

Whigs, accompanied by society ladies in London, started charitable famine relief appeals. It didn't work. In the 1847 elections those Irish who could vote overwhelmingly backed O'Connell and his demands for suspension of all rent and rates to the English and export of food, while demanding proper famine relief and insisting on repeal of the Union. Russell was livid. No more Lord Nice Guy! It was time for the 'hidden hand' of the free market ie the hidden hand of God according to Russell and Co, to strike down the ungrateful Irish with Malthus' "one mighty blow".

The Puritan God (or "market forces" if you prefer) is a vengeful God, particularly when it comes to dealing with ungrateful Irish Catholics who won't do as their English masters tell them to. The charitable societies were shut down, all relief efforts were stopped and the media campaign began to deny that the starvation was happening, or that if it was it was all the fault of the Irish anyway.

Whether in street fighting or a class facing adversity, there is, up to a certain point, a sense of the individual belonging to a larger group and that as long as you stick together you can tough it out — safety in numbers. Beyond that point however, in the face of seemingly certain death, that sense of the group wavers and breaks as panic turns the group into a collection of individuals forced to run for their lives on the basis of everyone for themselves.

Writing on the Wall

The Irish small peasants and workers had held on through the unimaginable suffering of late 1846 and early 1847 in the hope of seeing relief after the elections. The potato crop did not fail

after 1847 but there had been no seed potatoes left after the previous year's failure so there was virtually no harvest to come and typhus and cholera were rife throughout the land.

Now they could read the writing on the wall in London. It was one word and the word was death. At some point the whole Irish working class stared death in the face. The stream of emigrants turned into a flood.

The sense of belonging to a group had gone and everybody was left to save themselves as best they could. Those who could get a ticket on a boat fled for their lives. Those that couldn't, especially in the poorer areas in the west and south of Ireland, just died. They died in the fields, in their houses, and by the roadsides. With no one to bury them, they rotted where they fell. But not so in the churches, most of whose gates were chained and locked to keep the desperation of the starving people out.

Then in 1848 the potato harvest had another total failure. This time the London newspapers said nothing. As far as they were concerned it wasn't happening, and even if it was it was nothing to do with them. The "White Man's Burden" didn't go as far as feeding the starving. The British empire ruled over Ireland guaranteeing the Pax Britannica (British Peace), but in Connaught and Munster it was the peace of the dead.

Independence

Not all those who stayed died. There was food in Ireland and in the rest of the world. Those who had money did not starve. Those who had larger pieces of land and grew other crops also pulled through. The point was that those whose lives depended on the potato were the workers and, especially, the small peasants who had resisted losing the independence of self-sufficiency that land ownership gives. They had little or no money because they were still trying to live outside the full control of the bosses and the money system.

In a letter to one of his colleagues, a 'political economist' said "no permanent or substantial good can be done until all small farms and small tenancies are got rid of. They are calculated to destroy that wholesome dependence of the lower on the upper classes, which is one of the master links of society; and to encourage the habits of idleness, which are the bane of all moral feeling...The two deficiencies in Ireland are want of capital and want of industry. By destroying small tenancies you obtain both".

Ungovernable

The Great Hunger certainly destroyed the self-sufficiency of the Irish small peasantry and much besides. The language was almost destroyed and through this and the general devastation perhaps the bulk of Irish culture, much of it memorised rather than recorded on paper, was lost for ever. But if the English thought that this would destroy Irish resistance to English rule, the opposite was true.

Refugees from the Hunger flocked to the industrial North of the country, particularly Belfast, where their descendants today make up the ungovernable force that is the Republican community of that city. Worse still from the perspective of the upper class the spread of Irish around the world – particularly in the USA and Australia – helped to provide political and financial support to the

excluded Republican communities of the British-occupied North. This also narrows the British upper class's room for militarist manoeuvres.

Irish emigrants and their descendants have continued to play a strong role in the class struggle in Britain and elsewhere in the world in anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movements. Naturally being Irish or Irish-descended doesn't determine your politics or outlook on life. But when it comes to people dying of hunger because they have no money even though there's enough food for everyone, those of us who say "fuck the money — give 'em the food — now!" won't take no for an answer.

In the '80s Bob Geldof set up Live Aid to raise money for the starving in Ethiopia. We say Geldof is a traitor to the memory of the Great Hunger because he helped to create a spectacle which covered up the political causes of hunger and the money system which causes it. Until the money system which dictates that those without money to buy food must starve is destroyed and replaced by a social system which guarantees all people, without exception, the right to food on the basis of valuing human life for its own sake, we will never rest.

Face Up!

We will fight like fuck, and any bastard pacifist who condemns us for fighting had better first explain why their hero, founder and president of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and holier than thou pacifist Bertrand Russell never had anything to say about the mass murder committed by his grandfather, Lord John Russell.

As for the scum out there who merely regurgitate the murderous ideas of Malthus and then have the nerve to wrap them in a Green 'deep ecology' flag, you'd be well advised to keep out of the way as well.

One thing's for sure; we've got a bone to pick with the British Empire and the capitalist system which condemns people to death by starvation for the crime of being poor. Actually we've got lots of bones to pick. Fucking millions of bones.

If you think this article has been too simplistic and biased, perhaps you'd like to check out the entry for "Irish Famine" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* for a fuller and more unbiased exposition of the facts. It doesn't take very long to read.

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