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THE GREAT FAMINE IN IRELAND, 1845-1849

1. Background to the Great Famine

Agricultural practices

Social conditions

Land division

Dependence on the potato

Laissez Faire policy

Over-population

2. The Famine years

Death, Disease and starvation

Workhouses

The Coffin Ships

Relief

3. Effects of the Great Famine

The dead & cultural changes

Emigration

Nationalism

The beginning of the end for the Landlord system

1. BACKGROUND TO THE GREAT FAMINE

AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES

The potato was the principal source of nutrition for the vast majority of the poorer classes because this crop produced more food per acre than wheat and could also be used to generate income. The practice of Conacre/Land Division meant that peasants needed to produce the biggest crop possible. The most variety of potato was the 'Aran Banner' which, whilst producing high yields also was very susceptible to Blight.

Many farmers had a few animals; the pig, easily fed on left-overs and requiring little space, was quite common. In many cases, however, other crops and animals were used to pay the rent and were never regarded as food.

SOCIAL CONDITIONS

At the start of the famine over one half of the population of the country lived in small 1 roomed dwellings. Little or no furniture and animals would be accommodated with the occupants of the. The other half would live in 2 storey houses or mansions - landlords or wealthy tenants - mostly found along the East and the South Coast. Two thirds of the population were involved in agriculture.

The arrival of the month of June indicated the start of the hungry or meal months in rural Ireland as old potatoes were not dug until August. People simply had nothing to eat or at best could manage a meal of porridge. Hunger was commonplace and small scale famines were therefore not unknown.

DEPENDENCE ON THE POTATO

The potato became the staple diet of much of the country during the early 1800s as it was ideally suited to the Irish climate, could be grown even in poor soils, gave a high return per acre and a single acre could support a family of 5 - 6 people.

By 1845, it is estimated that about one third of the entire population was totally dependent on the potato, and in poor regions, like Mayo, it was the only food eaten by up to nine - tenths of the population.

LAISSEZ - FAIRE

The policy of 'Laissez Faire' (meaning to leave alone) meant that Governments did not interfere in business markets or the economy in general. This policy was

disastrous when famine struck as it meant that there was no way of quickly rectifying the crisis. Scarce food became costly and the poor simply starved

OVER-POPULATION

While the population of Europe rose throughout the 19th Century, population growth in Ireland was particularly dramatic. In 1800, the population was about 5 million. By 1841, it had risen to over 8 million according to the census of that year. This growth can be explained by the fact that people married early in life and they tended to have large families.

Unlike Britain, Ireland lacked major industrial centres. Jobs were scarce and there was little point in trying to save up by waiting to get married. A part of the family farm on which to grow food and a house built with stones and 'mud kneaded with straw' was the most any married couple could hope for. Early marriages were followed by large families - children were seen by parents as insurance against starvation in their old age. As a result subdivision and holdings were gradually reduced to tiny plots.

2. THE FAMINE YEARS

In the early summer of 1845, on the 11th September of that year a disease, referred to as blight was noted to have attacked the crop in some areas. In that year, one - third of the entire crop was destroyed. In 1846, the crop was a total failure. This report came from a Galway priest.

"As to the potatoes, they are gone - clean gone. If travelling by night, you would know when a potato field was near by the smell. The fields present a space of withered black stalks".

Though 1847 was free from blight, few seed potatoes had been planted, and so the famine continued. Yet the country was producing plenty of food. As the Irish politician, Charles Duffy wrote: "Ships continue to leave the country, loaded with grain and meat".

As food was scarce people would eat anything such as nettles, berries, roots, wildlife, animals, dogs and cats in order to survive.

In the mid 1840's, Bishop Loras of Dubuque, Iowa, visited Ireland. He was so appalled by the conditions that he found there that he submitted a letter to the London Tablet. Here is a portion of that letter:

I assure you, dear sir, the scene of poverty and misery in some quarters was wonderful (that is, awful), and I am told that it is still worse in other counties. I saw many poor cottages covered with straw, half buried in the ground, and occupied by poor Catholic tenants, who cultivate in the sweat of their brow small fields divided by poor green hedges or half-tumbled walls.

The manner in which many were clothed was a sure indication of great poverty and unavoidable sufferings. At every station, at least in towns, the stage was surrounded by whole families of beggars, who, by their pressing demands, would elicit charity from the most hardened heart. Many of those cottages were crumbling in ruins and abandoned by their tenants, who had emigrated to some

more hospitable shore. As I was traveling along I saw occasionally some of those extensive and princely estates occupied by rich English lords, whose dwellings and parks are surrounded by old lofty walls and shaded by quite annuated trees. The contrast between great opulence and extreme poverty was truly appalling, and one is at a loss to understand how this state of things can be tolerated in this age of light and philanthropy.

Another contrast I cannot help noticing. As soon as I crossed the Channel from Dublin to Holyhead, In England, I perceived great change for the better in the face of the country, and in the look of the people; so much so, that one could hardly believe that Ireland and England were both under the same laws, and protected by the same government; and more than that, the poor Irish are either incarcerated or transported, whenever they make any attempt to better their truly miserable condition.

DEATH, DISEASE AND STARVATION

Subsistence-level Irish farmers found their food stores rotting in their cellars, the crops they relied on to pay the rent to their British and Protestant landlords destroyed. Peasants who ate the rotten produce sickened and entire villages were consumed with cholera and typhus. Parish priests desperate to provide for their congregations were forced to forsake buying coffins in order to feed starving families, with the dead going unburied or buried only in the clothes they wore when they died.

The potato crop of 1845 was destroyed by a fungus, *Phytophthora infestans*, commonly known as Blight, which had spread from North America to Europe. By the early autumn of 1845 it was clear that famine was imminent in Ireland, but British government reaction was slow and incapable of responding to the magnitude of the crisis.

WORKHOUSES

Landlords evicted hundreds of thousands of peasants, who then crowded into disease-infested workhouses. Other landlords paid for their tenants to emigrate, sending hundreds of thousands of Irish to America and other English-speaking countries. In many cases, these ships reached port only after losing a third of their passengers to disease, hunger and other causes.

Conditions in the workhouses were desperate and often the only way to get food was to fight for it, leading to misery, violence and even more despondency.

Diseases in the workhouses were common and included Typhus, Relapsing Fever. Dysentery, Bacillary Dysentery. Scurvy and Asiatic Cholera. There was little in the way of medical care for the victims.

THE COFFIN SHIPS

The condition of the ships in which tens of thousands of people emigrated were appalling as many middle-men used sub-standard vessels and carried too many people, with a view to making a quick profit. On one of these coffin ships, of the 348 passengers, 117 died at sea; on another, going to Canada, 158 died of a total of 476 passengers.

RELIEF

During the winter of 1845-1846 Peel's government spent £100,000 on American maize which was sold to the destitute. The Irish called the maize 'Peel's brimstone'. Eventually the government also initiated relief schemes such as canal-building and road building to provide employment. The workers were paid at the end of the week and often men had died of starvation before their wages arrived. Even worse, many of the schemes were of little use: men filled in valleys and flattened hills just so the government could justify the cash payments. The Irish crisis was used as an excuse by Peel in order for him to repeal the Corn Laws in 1846, but their removal brought Ireland little benefit. The major problem was not that there was no food in Ireland - there was plenty of wheat, meat and dairy produce, much of which was being exported to England - but that the Irish peasants had no money with which to buy the food. The repeal of the Corn Laws had no effect on Ireland because however cheap grain was, without money the Irish peasants could not buy it.

In 1846 the major disaster began. This was due to number of factors. In 1845 the crop only partially failed. It totally failed in 1846. Peel's government was defeated in England and Lord John Russell became Prime Minister of a Conservative Government. He had a different attitude to that of Peel:

"It must be quite clear that we cannot feed the people...
We can at best keep down prices."

The starving people had no money however to buy food at any price, so keeping the prices down was useless. The Assistant Secretary of Ireland at this time was Charles Trevelyan, who believed in *laissez faire*, the policy of 'leaving well alone'. To give anything to the people for nothing would, he said, result in

"Having the country on us for an indefinite number of years."

He stopped the public works and sent back a boat load of Indian Corn which had arrived from the U.S.A. The death toll steadily mounted, due to starvation and to the spread of typhus and cholera. Thousands flocked to the overcrowded workhouses and into towns - spreading disease and causing more deaths.

In September 1847 Russell's government ended what little relief it had made available and demanded that the Poor Law rate be collected before any further money be made available by the Treasury. The collection of these rates in a period of considerable hardship was accompanied by widespread unrest and violence. Some 16,000 extra troops were sent to Ireland and troubled parts of the country were put under martial law. The potato crop failed once more in 1848, and this was accompanied by Asiatic cholera.

In 1847 the Government realised that their policies were not working and made money available for loan and established soup kitchens. Russell's Government ended what little relief it had made available in late 1847 and demanded that the Poor Law rate, a tax on property to fund relief in Ireland, be collected before any further money be made available by the Treasury. The collection of these taxes in a period of considerable hardship was predictably accompanied by widespread unrest and violence. Some 16,000 extra troops were sent to Ireland and troubled

parts of the country were put under martial law.

Government efforts were also helped by some local landlords who lowered rents and distributed clothes and food to their tenants. As a result, many landlords went bankrupt. The Quakers (The Society of Friends) also did much to help.

3. EFFECTS OF THE GREAT FAMINE

THE DEAD & CULTURAL CHANGES

The Irish Famine of 1846-50 took as many as one million lives from hunger and disease, and changed the social and cultural structure of Ireland in a number of profound ways.

The Irish language, which was already in decline, suffered a near fatal blow from the Famine, since it was the more remote areas which still used Irish that were most affected by the famine.

Land holdings became larger, as the tendency to subdivide the family farm declined. From now on, the farm was given to one son and the others often had little choice but to emigrate. The Famine also changed centuries-old agricultural practices, hastening the end of the division of family estates into tiny lots capable of sustaining life only with a potato crop.

The famine affected the poorest classes - the cottiers and labourers - most of all, the cottier class being almost wiped out.

EMIGRATION

It is estimated that at least one million people died from starvation and its attendant diseases, whilst a further 1 million emigrated during the famine years. The population of the island dropped from over 8 million in 1845 to about 6 million in 1850. By 1900, over 4 million had left Ireland and emigration continued well into the 1950's - averaging 60, 000 a year. Early marriages almost disappeared and a decline in the birth rate resulted.

NATIONALISM

The millions who left Ireland on the emigrant ships took with them a hatred of England and English rule that has survived to the present day. Suddenly, Irish people realised that they had to take control of their own affairs. England had failed in its obligations to the people that it ruled and a new generation of rebels and agitators were born. Parnell and Davitt fought for and achieved land reforms. The Gaelic Athletic Association was formed to promote a greater sense of Irish identity. Rebels such as Padraig Pearse were expounding the need for national independence from England. The 1916 Easter Rising and the subsequent War of Independence, Civil War and ultimate Independence have roots in the Great Famine and the 1798 Rising by the United Irishmen that preceded it.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END FOR THE LANDLORD SYSTEM

The Landlord class was ruined by the famine. The Government introduced the

Encumbered Estates Act in 1849, making it easier for landlords to sell off their land. The land acts later in the century fought for by Parnell and Davitt finally put paid to this hated system of authority in rural Ireland.

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