

Was the Irish potato famine caused by British policy (as opposed to being a natural disaster)?

Europe's worst modern peacetime catastrophe with a million people dying of starvation, disease, and exposure and another million fleeing their homeland as refugees, seeking safety in England and the United States. The hardest hit were inevitably the rural poor, the landless laborers, cottiers, and small farmers: the number of landless laborers was to fall by over a quarter and of small farmers by nearly half in the course of the Famine.

Why did these people die or seek safety in flight? Britain after all was the richest country in Europe, "the workshop of the world," and the ruler of a great Empire. For a variety of reasons the Whig government of the day failed to take adequate measures to keep the Irish alive.

Certainly Lord John Russell's government implemented measures of famine relief, but this was only done with the greatest reluctance, in the meanest way possible, and invariably proved too little too late. The scale of the suffering forced the government to introduce emergency measures including a program of public works and the establishment of soup kitchens.... [F]or many this only meant that instead of dying in December, they died in March.

Throughout these years the British government remained steadfastly committed to the belief that any interference with market forces should be kept to a minimum, that the rights of property had to be upheld no matter what, and that the costs of relief should as far as possible be borne by Ireland lest the country should remain dependent on British handouts. "What brought them, in great measure at least, to their present state of helplessness?" Sir Charles Wood, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, wrote to Russell. He answered himself: "Their habit of depending on Government. What are we trying to do now? To force them upon their own resources."...

When a delegation from Ireland visited Russell to beg for more relief for the starving poor, this humane and liberal gentleman read to them from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. Such measures would only make things worse, he argued. Once again, according to John Mitchel, it was not the failure of the potato crop that killed the Irish, but Political Economy.

Altogether, the British government spent some 7[pounds] million on famine relief. This contrasts sharply with the [pounds] 20 million spent compensating the slave owners when slavery was abolished in 1833 (the slaves, of course, received no compensation for their enslavement). This money was disbursed to uphold the rights of property and went to the deserving rich ...

Compounding the hunger and disease was the way that the Famine became the occasion for dramatic land clearances, for a concerted landlord offensive against the poor.... Exactly how many people were evicted during these grim years is unknown because the authorities only began keeping records in 1849. Nevertheless the figure certainly exceeds half a million people, an astonishing figure by any standard. This is one of the most terrible acts of class war in British history even without the accompanying hunger....

The spectacle of troops, police, and bailiffs evicting starving, sick men, women, and children, levelling their homes and leaving them to live in holes in the ground or die by the roadside even appalled some members of the British Government.... The majority of the cabinet insisted that the rights of property had to be upheld....

There was a real food deficit in Ireland. Nevertheless, it is still incredible that while people were dying in the thousands from hunger, wagon convoys guarded by troops carried food out of the country. If the government had banned these exports it would not have fed all the starving but would have saved another hundred, perhaps two hundred thousand people....

Source C Title: _____

Source C Author: _____ Source C Date: _____

Summarize the author's perspective on the main question and key evidence he or she provides to support that view.

"No Need to Apologise for the Potato Famine," Ruth Dudley Edwards *The Independent (UK)*, **June 3, 1997**

Mr Blair [the prime minister] is too sanguine. Even in these days of instant communications, fast transport and international co-operation, the developed world has still found no way of eradicating famine. The heart directs that immediate needs be met; the head fears worse long-term suffering if peoples give up self-reliance in favour of aid-dependency.

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You have been reading about a period of social and economic reform in 19th century Britain as demonstrated in your Manchester document. When a blight, or disease, destroyed several years of potato crops in Ireland, a devastating famine occurred in Ireland. Many believe the famine was caused by a failure of British policy as much as by the crop failures. In this Topic Inquiry you will break into small groups to examine evidence and discuss this main question: Was the Irish potato famine caused by British policy (as opposed to being a natural disaster)?

Step 1 Read the intro article and come up with some initial points: Develop Questions and plan the Investigation

Source A University of California Museum of Paleontology, Monoculture and the Irish Potato Famine: 22 August 2008:

Lack of genetic variation in Irish potatoes contributed to the severity of the Irish potato famine, which devastated Ireland's population and economy. Today, evolutionary theory tells us that relying on crops with low genetic variation can lead to disaster. Heeding the warnings of scientists and history may help us prevent wide-scale crop devastation due to changing environmental conditions.

Lumpers

In the 1800s, the Irish solved their problem of feeding a growing population by planting potatoes. Specifically, they planted the "lumper" potato variety. And since potatoes can be propagated vegetatively, all of these lumpers were clones, genetically identical to one another.

The lumper fed Ireland for a time, but it also set the stage for human and economic ruin. Evolutionary theory suggests that populations with low genetic variation are more vulnerable to changing environmental conditions than are diverse populations. The Irish potato clones were certainly low on genetic variation, so when the environment changed and a potato disease swept through the country in the 1840s, the potatoes (and the people who depended upon them) were devastated.

The importance of diversity

The genetically identical lumpers were all susceptible to a rot caused by *Phytophthora infestans*, which turns non-resistant potatoes to inedible slime. Because Ireland was so dependent on the potato, one in eight Irish people died of starvation in three years during the Irish potato famine of the 1840s.

Source A Title: _____

Source A Author: _____ Source A Date: _____

Summarize the author's perspective on the main question and key evidence he or she provides to support that view.

- What do you think is the main argument on the "yes" side of the question?
- What do you think is the main argument on the "no" side of the question?
- As a group, come to agreement about the major points on both sides of the question.

Major Points "YES"	Major Points "NO"

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- **After considering the various points of view and evidence my point of view on this question at this point in time is:**
- **Supporting evidence for my point of view is:**
- **My group basically agrees on the following points:**

Thesis: Write a thesis statement for an essay (just the thesis) regarding the blame for the Irish Potato famine: (You choose the side)

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Step 2: Examine Additional Sources and Perspectives

Source B “Historical Notes: God and England Made the Irish Famine,” by Brendan Graham

The Independent (UK), December 3, 1998

On 20 August 1845, the day the potato blight *Phytophthora infestans* was first discovered in Dublin’s Royal Botanic Gardens, the population of Ireland stood close to nine million people—almost half the combined population of England, Scotland and Wales. Mostly Catholic. Mostly poor. What was to happen over the next few years was to ensure that by the turn of the century half of Ireland’s population had disappeared.

Two million acres in Ireland—one-third of all tilled land—was given over to the cultivation of the lumpers potato. While five to six million people were heavily dependent on the crop, some three million souls depended on it totally. The lumpers was highly prolific and highly nutritious. The powerful combination of high yield and high nutrient content in this root would, in its absence, also prove to be a deadly combination. For how else were the people to be fed?

The Union of Ireland with Great Britain in 1800 had not been a Union of equal partners. Ireland was regarded by Westminster as little more than England’s granary. Sir Robert Peel, Prime Minister of the Tory Government up to June 1846, neatly captioned the British viewpoint when he uttered, “The real issue is the improvement of the social and moral condition of the masses of the population”, a theme oft repeated. Charles E. Trevelyan, who served under both Peel and Russell at the Treasury, and had prime responsibility for famine relief in Ireland, was clear about God’s role: “The judgement of God sent the calamity to teach the Irish a lesson, that calamity must not be too much mitigated”.

John Mitchel, the Young Ireland leader, transported in 1848 to Van Diemens Land, had a different view, calling the famine “an artificial famine. Potatoes failed in like manner all over Europe; yet there was no famine save in Ireland. The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine”.

A Trevelyan letter to Edward Twisleton, Chief Poor Law Commissioner in Ireland, contains the censorious, “We must not complain of what we really want to obtain. If small farmers go, and their landlords are reduced to sell portions of their estates to persons who will invest capital we shall at last arrive at something like a satisfactory settlement of the country”.

Soup kitchens did keep the Irish alive for a while, some three million daily which is a lasting testament that where there is Government will, so too is there a way. However the free “Soyer’s soup”—Alexis Soyer being the French chef at the Savoy hotel who was called in to design a soup for the famine-ridden Irish—if life-preserving for the body, was certainly not the thing for the moral rectitude of the Irish spirit. The soup kitchens were closed. Relief works were ushered in, which saw starving men, women and children breaking rocks and building “famine roads”—roads which led nowhere—for as little as a sixpenny a day.

Peel’s philosophy of a free-market economy was in full swing and scarcity meant higher prices. Potatoes were now a penny a piece. A day’s labour would gain for you and your family six potatoes. Poetry, music and dancing stopped. The famine killed everything.

Was Britain to blame? Tony Blair in his May 1997 “apology speech” stated that those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive human tragedy. Blair’s speech was important to Irish people all over the world in that it officially recognised, for the first time, that the famine was more than just the “Irish potato blight”. His words became part of the healing process between the two islands. Next follows admission of culpability and the asking for forgiveness. Finally there is the forgiveness itself. Are we, the Irish, ready yet?

Source B Title: _____

Source B Author: _____ Source B Date: _____

Summarize the author’s perspective on the main question and key evidence he or she provides to support that view.

“The Great Irish Famine: A Crime of Free Market Economics,” by John Newsinger *Monthly Review*, April 1996

Potato blight (the fungus *phytophthora infestans*) first appeared in Ireland in 1845, destroying some 40 percent of the crop. It caused considerable hardship but, as yet, few fatalities. The following year the blight ruined the whole crop. The result was the terrible famine of the winter of 1846-47 that was to continue into the early 1850s. This was Western

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The disaster that between 1845 and 1851 caused a million deaths and led about one and a half million people to emigrate was largely a result of desperately bad luck. The population had doubled over the previous half-century; dependence on the potato—the staple food of half the Irish people—was greater than ever before; the fungus that destroyed the crop was unknown (no antidote was discovered until 1882); and Britain had suffered a bad harvest in 1846 and a financial crisis in 1847. The scale and duration of the Irish famine would have made it impossible for any British government to have coped with it. The politicians and public servants involved were trying honourably to deal with a disaster way beyond their competence.

Source D Title: _____

Source D Author: _____ Source D Date: _____

Summarize the author's perspective on the main question and key evidence he or she provides to support that view.

Step 3 Synthesize: Use evidence to Formulate Conclusions

Formulate Compelling Arguments with Evidence

Work with your group to record the strongest arguments and supporting evidence for your assigned position.

Present Your Position

Takes notes in the chart below as you listen to the other side present their arguments and evidence.

Switch Sides

Now record the strongest arguments and evidence for the opposite side and take notes while listening to the other side present their arguments.

Step 4 Demonstrate: Communicate Conclusions and take Informed action

My Point of View

COMPELLING ARGUMENTS CHART		
YES	Arguments & Evidence	
		Notes
NO	Arguments & Evidence	
		Notes