

TOPIC: Pre-Famine Ireland

SUBJECT/GRADE LEVEL: Social Studies, Grade Level 9

TITLE: Causes of the Great Irish Famine

AIM QUESTION: Why was there a famine in Ireland in the 1840s?

NEW YORK STATE SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS:

World History: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history, and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

Geography: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the geography of the interdependent world in which we live -- local, national and global -- including the distribution of people, places and environments over the Earth's surface.

TEACHER BACKGROUND: The meaning of the Great Irish Famine has been contested by political activists and historians from the 1850s to the present day. The Great Irish Famine has been the source of nationalist anger, a historical problem to be coolly dissected and demythologized, and a reminder of the realities of hunger and poverty in the modern world. Mary Robinson, the former President of the Republic of Ireland argues that reflection on the Great Irish Famine should spur action to prevent similar catastrophes in the present and future. A highly contentious political debate is over whether or not the government of Great Britain consciously pursued genocidal policies designed to depopulate Ireland through death and emigration.

One way to approach the political debates is to explore the differences between the goals of political activists and historians. The primary concern of activists is to win support for their political position in an effort to bring about political, social and economic changes in society. While historians also have political views and goals, their professional commitment requires that they examine events from multiple perspectives and that they hold themselves to a higher standard when they draw conclusions based on evidence. As students read excerpts from primary source documents and interpretations of the causes of the Great Irish Famine and the reasons for British policies, they need to consider the following questions: a) "Is this commentator writing as a political activist or an historian?"; b) "What is her/his point of view about the Great Irish Famine and other events in Irish history?"; c) "Does her/his point of view aid in their examination of events or interfere with their analysis?"; d) "How could the argument be made more effective?"; and e) "Can someone be impartial when researching and writing about a topic like the Great Irish Famine?"

AIM: Why was there a famine in Ireland in the 1840s?

ASSESSMENT:

- Students will demonstrate an understanding of cause and effect in history and the ability to support conclusions based on an evaluation of evidence through individual and group writing assignments and during group and class discussions.
- Students will demonstrate the importance of examining and respecting multiple perspectives when explaining historical events.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to examine and explain the significance of primary source documents.

DO NOW ACTIVITY: Examine the first quote in section A on the ACTIVITY SHEET. Based on your own experience, do you believe this statement? Explain.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: Has anyone every seen a political debate on television? been part of a family argument around the dinner table? heard a heated “discussion” after a traffic accident? How do you pick sides? How do you decide who to agree with? How do you know who is telling the “truth”? Can there be more than one “truth”? What criteria do you use to decide?

TRANSITIONAL ACTIVITY: Do you accept the accuracy of the statement that "The poorer Irish appear to me the most easily contented, and the most philosophically and truly happy of any peasantry I have ever seen; faithful, generous, warm-hearted, fearless and reckless, they smile in peace over a handful of bad potatoes, and devoutly thank the Providence who provides it"? Explain. When there are multiple explanations of a historical event, how do you decide who to agree with? What criteria do you use to evaluate arguments?

ACTIVITY: Student teams examine ACTIVITY SHEET: Why was there a famine in Ireland in the 1840s? and answer questions 1 and 2.

Class discusses the main ideas in each quotation and which idea comes closest to their views about the Irish Potato Famine and why.

In your view, why are possible explanations for the Great Irish famine of the 1840s so sharply debated?

SUMMARY QUESTION: Why was there a famine in Ireland in the 1840s?

HOMEWORK: Write an essay explaining your views on the quotations about the causes of the Great Irish famine.

APPLICATION: What issues today generate sharp disagreement and different explanations of events? How do you decide who to side with in these debates?

Reflection: Teachers recommend using this lesson as a case study during a unit on industrialization in Europe. It can follow discussions of enclosure or a general examination of the impact of industrialization on pre-industrial people.

(Edited Version)

ACTIVITY SHEET: Why was there a famine in Ireland in the 1840s?

Examine the quotations on the cause of the Irish Potato Famine.

- 1) Explain the main ideas in each quotation.
- 2) Explain which idea comes closest to your views about the Irish Potato Famine and why.

A) The cause was the "flawed character" of the Irish.

"The poorer Irish appear to me the most easily contented, and the most philosophically and truly happy of any peasantry I have ever seen; faithful, generous, warm-hearted, fearless and reckless, they smile in peace over a handful of bad potatoes, and devoutly thank the Providence who provides it."

- Edward Newman, Notes on Irish Natural History (1840). Cited in Austin Bourke, The Visitation of God?: The Potato and the Great Irish Famine. Edited by Jacqueline Hill and Cormac Ó Gráda (Dublin, Ireland: Lilliput Press, 1993), p. 69.

"(T)he poor were the architects of their own misery. No other crop produces such an abundance of food on the same extent of ground, requires so little skill and labour either to rear it or prepare it for food, and leaves so large a portion of the labourer's time unoccupied. Now, these are great temptations, and it requires forethought and energy to overcome them. When they go to England or America, they earn their subsistence. It no longer depends on the potato, the crop which fosters, from the earliest childhood, habits of indolence, improvidence and waste."

- The Plough, A Journal of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (London, 1846). Cited in Austin Bourke, The Visitation of God?: The Potato and the Great Irish Famine. Edited by Jacqueline Hill and Cormac Ó Gráda (Dublin, Ireland: Lilliput Press, 1993), p. 68.

B) The cause was British colonial policy in Ireland.

"No sack of Magdeburg, or ravage of the Palatinate ever approached the horror and dislocation to the slaughters done in Ireland by mere official red tape and stationery, and the principles of political economy. . . The Almighty sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine."

- John Mitchel, The Last Conquest of Ireland (perhaps), Dublin, 1861, p. 322. Cited in Noel Kissane, The Irish Famine. A Documentary History, Dublin: National Library of Ireland, 1995.

C) The cause was economic and natural law.

"Famine seems to be the last, the most dreadful resource of nature. The power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction; and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But

should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and tens of thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world."

- Thomas Robert Malthus, Essay on the Principle of Population (1798). Cited in Cormac Ó Gráda, Ireland before and After the Famine. Explorations in economic history, 1800-1925, 2nd edition (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 6.

D) The cause was intense competition for a limited resource, land.

"It has been asserted that the relation of the tenant to the landlord, . . . is to blame for all this poverty. . . . From another side comes the assertion that the shameless oppression inflicted by the English is the cause of the trouble. . . . Or the blame is laid on the Protestant Church forced upon a Catholic nation. . . . (But) the cause of this poverty lies in the existing social conditions, . . . With the small subdivisions of the land, . . . especially in the competition here found in the form of the subdivision of the soil . . . an improvement of the soil by the investment of capital was not to be thought of.

- Friedrich Engels (1845), from The Condition of the Working Class in England, ed., W. Henderson and W. Chaloner (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1968), p. 307-308. Also check Marx and Engels, Ireland and the Irish Question, p. 39-43.

(Adapted/Rewritten Version)

ACTIVITY SHEET: Why was there a famine in Ireland in the 1840s?

Examine the quotations on the cause of the Irish Potato Famine.

- 1) Explain the main ideas in each quotation.
- 2) Explain which idea comes closest to your views about the Irish Potato Famine and why.

A) The cause was the "flawed character" of the Irish.

The poorer Irish are the most easily contented and the most truly happy of any peasantry I have ever seen. They are faithful, generous, warm-hearted, fearless and reckless. They smile in peace over a handful of bad potatoes and devoutly thank God who provides it.

- E. Newman, Notes on Irish Natural History (1840).

The Irish poor are the cause of their own misery. The potato crop encourages, from childhood, habits of laziness, negligence and waste. No other crop produces such an abundance of food on the same amount of ground, requires so little skill and labor, and leaves so large a portion of the laborer's time unoccupied, as the potato. These are great temptations. It requires thought and energy to overcome them. When the Irish go to England or America, they earn their keep.

- The Plough (1846).

B) The cause was British colonial policy in Ireland.

No destruction of a city or attack on a castle ever approached the horror and dislocation to the slaughters done in Ireland by government policies and the principles of political economy. The Almighty sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine.

- John Mitchel, The Last Conquest of Ireland.

C) The cause was economic and natural law.

Famine seems to be the last, the most dreadful resource of nature. The power of population growth is much greater than to the power of the earth to provide all people with enough food to survive. Because of this, premature death must visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active contributors to depopulation. They come before the great army of destruction and often complete the dreadful work. But if human vices fail in this war of extermination, epidemics, pestilence, and plague

advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and tens of thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population.

- Thomas Robert Malthus, Essay on the Principle of Population (1798).

D) The cause was intense competition for a limited resource, land.

The cause of poverty in Ireland lies in the existing social conditions. The land is divided into small units for rental. This causes sharp competition between tenant farmers. It prevents farmers from investing in improving their farms.

- Friedrich Engels, Condition of the Working Class in England.