

Grade level: 9-12

Famine curriculum

Lesson aim: Students will consider whether the great Irish famine can be considered an act of genocide.

New York State Standards: Social Studies. 2 World History. Students analyze changing and competing interpretations of issues, events and developments throughout world history.

Historical background: The Irish nationalist John Mitchel said of the famine, "The Almighty indeed sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine," and that statement had represented the feelings of many Irish and Irish-Americans about British culpability for famine deaths and dispossession. Today, contemporary historians agree that the data supports the charge that the British government under Lord John Russell (1846-1852) sacrificed the Irish for their economic principles, provided relief that was too little and too late, and violated the spirit of the Act of Union by directing that Ireland alone be responsible for Irish relief. Historians do not believe that the British carried out a policy of genocide.

Lesson:

1. The word genocide is a recent one; it was a term coined by Raphael Lemkin in his book Axis Rule in Occupied Europe (1944). He took the Greek word genos (tribe or race) and added the Latin cide (killer or destroyer) to form the word genocide, "the destruction of a nation or an ethnic group (Murphy 180). In his book Rwanda and Genocide in the Twentieth Century (1995), Alain Destexhe wrote, "The specificity of genocide does not arise from the extent of the killings, nor their savagery or resulting infamy, but solely from the intention: the destruction of a group." That destruction which is collective act, not a series of individual incidents, requires intention as well as careful and detailed organization.

2. Select the famine and two twentieth century events that resulted in the high mortality of particular peoples: Armenia the European Holocaust, Bosnia and Rwanda. Complete the chart below with supporting evidence that you have found in your research:

Characteristics of
genocide:

famine

Example 1

Example 2

Intention to destroy
a particular group

collective act

extermination is
carefully organized

individual deaths
are intentional

individuals are
killed only for
reasons of ethnicity

3. Which event(s) meets the requirement of an act called genocide? Explain your answer with evidence from your chart.