

Teacher Background: Was British policy in Ireland "genocide"??*

Some historians and political activists have argued that British policy in Ireland during the Great Famine was a form of genocide. They believe it should be classified and studied along side other atrocities in world history, such as Nazi efforts to exterminate European Jews during World War II (the Holocaust), Turkish attacks on Armenians during the era of World War I, the Atlantic Slave Trade, and the destruction of native civilizations following the Columbian encounter.

In 1951, the United Nations defined genocide in a treaty that was signed by the United States. While the Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was written in response to Nazi efforts to exterminate European Jewry, it also included other types of offenses. According to the treaty, genocide consists of "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group." Among the outlawed actions are "causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group" and "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." Some critics have argued that these criteria make the definition of genocide too broad.

Irish nationalist John Mitchel argued in *The Last Conquest of 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." But do benign neglect, "official red tape" and laissez-faire "principles of political economy" constitute genocide?

Both before and during the famine, most economic liberals argued that the path to social progress in Ireland lay in the elimination of the "surplus population." What they wanted was an Ireland that looked like the idealized vision which the English middle classes had of themselves. In 1847, Robert Murray wrote, "The surplus population of Ireland have been trained precisely for those pursuits which the unoccupied regions of North American require for their colonization. That surplus is an overwhelming incubus at home, whether to themselves or others. Remove them and you benefit them in a degree that cannot be estimated. Precisely as you do so, you raise the social condition of those who remain."

The failure of liberal economicists to explain precisely how the population problem was to be solved took on increasingly ominous overtones as the famine worsened. John Mitchel, with irony reminiscent of Jonathan Swift, suggested that his hungry countrymen could effectively carry out British policy toward the Irish and

do their patriot duty if, instead of waiting to starve to death, they "choose out in all the island two million trees, and thereupon go and hang yourselves."

To support the claim that the British were deliberately exploiting the Great Famine to depopulate the island, if not to destroy the Irish nation and the Irish people, nationalists pointed to the continued export of grain from Ireland to England during the worst years of the famine. However, the amount of grain exported could not have compensated for the failure of successive potato harvests, and, in any case, the people who most needed help could not have afforded to purchase the grain.

The charge that the British were pursuing a more or less overt policy of genocide against the Irish reflects the fact that the British had a very different set of priorities than did the Irish. It was the rigorous adherence to policies based on an economic liberal-Malthusian understanding of the Irish problem which insured that the natural disaster of the potato blight would give rise to the Great Famine of the 1840s and 1850s.

*prepared by Lawrence Frohman