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The Great Famine: Britain's Act of Genocide in Ireland?

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Abstract:

The Irish Great Famine is commonly acknowledged as a horrible natural catastrophe brought by a potato blight from 1845 to 1852. The consequence of the Famine impacted Ireland for over a century, as the Irish population decreased almost by half. In 1841, the population in Ireland was 8.18 million; in 1861, after the potato blight struck Ireland, there were only 5.8 million people, a 30% decrease in the population. Starvation accounted for approximately 1 million deaths, and emigration contributed to approximately 2 million losses of the Irish population during the famine. The repercussions of the event continued to impact Ireland through 1931 when the population had decreased to 4.21 million: approximately 4 million people had left Ireland.² Nevertheless, when the astonishing mortality statistics and inhumane acts of the British are considered, this catastrophe, instead of being viewed as a purely natural disaster, can clearly be seen as an avoidable act of genocide by the British. The fundamental purpose of this paper is to establish the possible contributing factors of British policies to this Irish tragedy.

Keywords: *Irish history, famine, environmental history, genocide, Britain, early modern European history, historical justice, food and science history, potato, empire and colonies*

1. Introduction: Natural Disaster or Intentional Genocide?

The Irish Great Famine is commonly acknowledged as a horrible natural catastrophe brought by a potato plight from 1845 to 1852. The consequence of the famine impacted Ireland for over a century, as the Irish population decreased almost by half. In 1841, the population in Ireland was 8.18 million; in 1861, after the potato blight struck Ireland, there were only 5.8 million people, a 30 % decrease in the population. Starvation accounted for approximately 1 million deaths, and emigration contributed to approximately 2 million losses of the Irish population during the famine.¹ The repercussions of the event continued to impact Ireland through 1931, when the population had decreased to 4.21 million: approximately 4 million people had left Ireland.² Nevertheless, when the astonishing mortality statistics and inhumane acts of the British are considered, this catastrophe, instead of being viewed as a purely natural disaster, can clearly be seen as an avoidable act of genocide by the British. The fundamental purpose of this paper is to establish the possible contributing factors of British policies to this Irish tragedy.

The Irish Famine was not only a cataclysm caused by a natural disaster, but hostile British actions also contributed to it, even though few acts of British oppression in Ireland, which tremendously intensified the mortality, were known to the public at the time. Nonetheless, in 1876, 24 years after the Great Famine, Mitchel John, the leading writer for The Nations newspaper during the Famine, wrote, "The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine."³ In 2012, Ciaran O'Murchadha, one of the most authoritative historians of Irish History, stated in his book, *The Great Famine: Ireland's Agony*, that "if genocide is defined as a deliberate, systematic use of an environmental catastrophe to destroy a people under the pretext of engineering social reform, then there is certainly a case to be answered."⁴ Britain's control of Ireland before the Famine generated a harsh environment for the Irish, who were mainly farmers at that time, by contributing to Ireland's agricultural transition, which resulted in the reliance on potato plantations. Furthermore, they deliberately exploited Ireland's resources during the Famine for their own interests and evicted farmers from their lands, resulting in their starvation. In fact, the potato blight was a disaster for agriculture over the entire European Continent from 1845 to 1852. However, no other country suffered as much as Ireland because of direct British acts of oppression there.

¹ Boyle, Phelim P., and Cormac O Grada. "Fertility Trends, Excess Mortality, and the Great Irish Famine." *Demography* 23, no. 4 (1986): 543-62. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2061350>.

² Guinnane, Timothy W. "The Great Irish Famine and Population: The Long View." *The American Economic Review* 84, no. 2 (1994): 303-8. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2117848>.

³ Mitchel, John. *The Last Conquest of Ireland* (perhaps) / by John Mitchel R. & T. Washbourne Glasgow 1876

⁴ McGowan, Mark G. "The Famine Plot Revisited: A Reassessment of the Great Irish Famine as Genocide." *Genocide Studies International* 11, no. 1 (2017): 87-104. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26986061>.

2. Background: Relationship between Irish and British Governments

Throughout history, religion has played a major role in Ireland's political status. The first loss of independence happened in 1171 when the Pope abolished the Kingship of Ireland. This decision downgraded the Kingdom of Ireland into a feudal province of the Roman Catholic Church under England's monarchy.⁵As the territory was dominated by the British for over four centuries, the British named their king also as the controller of Ireland. Thus, Henry VIII held the title Lord of Ireland through the Crown of Ireland Act 1542, which stated, "The King's highnesse, his heyres and successours, Kings of England, be alwayes Kings of Ireland."⁶This declaration identifies not only Henry VIII as the King of Ireland but also his successors. However, the cooperation between the British and the Pope did not last long, as conflict occurred between the Roman Catholic Church and Britain when Henry VIII embraced Protestantism and broke from Rome. Hence, when Queen Elizabeth I, a Protestant, inherited the throne of England and Ireland in 1558, the Pope released all of Queen Elizabeth I's Catholic lands, including Ireland,⁷ from loyalty to her. As a result, the Papacy and Europe's Catholic rulers changed their attitude and recognized Ireland as an independent country with its own parliament after 1558.

The recognition from the Pope, however, was not enough for Ireland to achieve independence. Ireland was still subject to the British for centuries as Britain controlled the legislative system of Ireland through the Poynings Law, which announced: "an Act that no Parliament be held in this Land until the Acts be certified into England."⁸ In other words, the Pope's recognition of Ireland's independence made no dent in the British executive status in Ireland. Although it failed to prevent Britain's control, the Pope's decree supported the desire of its Irish followers to revolt against British control. Since most Irish people were Catholics, they were averse to the British Protestants' regime, especially when the Pope identified the British as heretics.⁹This was crucial because the hostility between Protestants and Catholics made ruling one another difficult. Thus, the Irish, led by the Society of United Irishmen, launched the Rebellion of 1798, attempting to overthrow Britain's regulation and attain complete independence from Britain. The rebellion's initial plan was to take over Dublin and prevent British reinforcement. However, the plans of the insurgency were divulged to the British government, and the British army occupied the rebel assembly locations and arrested most rebel leaders. Although the British suppressed the uprising in Dublin, the surrounding counties continued the revolt. Being a long-term rival of the British, France allied with the Irish to confront British troops and dispatched an army with five thousand soldiers to land in Ireland. Joined by six thousand Irish soldiers, they fought numerous battles against Britain. Eventually, the British army defeated the rebels at Carlow and massacred them at Dunlavin Green and Carnew, which ended the uprising. Around fifty thousand civilians and soldiers lost their lives during the revolution. Such bloody conflicts were common occurrences in future British-Irish relations.

In the aftermath of the insurrection, the British repealed the measure of self-government in Ireland with the signing of the Acts of Union in August 1800, which united the Parliament of Great Britain with the Parliament of Ireland to create the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The British reformed the political structure of Ireland in Article IV of the Acts of Union: "That it be the fourth Article of Union, that four Lords Spiritual of Ireland by Rotation of Sessions, and twenty-eight Lords Temporal of Ireland, elected for Life by the Peers of Ireland, shall be the Number to sit and vote on the Part of Ireland in the House of Lords of the Parliament of the United Kingdom." The Act gave the British Parliament the right to keep charge of Ireland and the responsibility to support the development of Ireland.

Thus, during the famine, on the contractual level, it was not legal for Britain to abandon part of its country when that part of the nation was suffering from a natural disaster, especially one that Britain was partially responsible for. Moreover, on the ethical and moral level, it was inhumane for Britain to reject the help request from the starving nation and even to harm the Irish in favor of British interests.

3. Land-Tenant System and the Eviction of Irish Farmers

After the Act of Union, the Irish did not have enough land to grow crops because the British confiscated most of the land from the Irish Catholic landowners and granted it to British absentee Protestant landlords, who then rented it back to the Irish while they remained in Britain. In the 1840s, 24% of Irish tenant farmers possessed fewer than 5 acres per person, while another 40% planted in lands under 15 acres per person.¹⁰ The lack of land resulted in the Irish farmers' inability to sustain their livelihoods after handing in most of the products to the British landlords. Moreover, approximately 80% of Irish tenants were tenants at will, with the farmers "being in possession of the land for an indefinite period with the consent of the owner."¹¹This is crucial because, without a written lease, the Irish tenants feared eviction by the landlords at any time, which would include losing their investments in the land. The consequence is that the Irish

⁵Hynes, Michael J. "The Church of Ireland." *The Catholic Historical Review* 21, no. 4 (1936): 400-428. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25013410>.

⁶Acts of the Old Irish Parliament 1542 c. 1 (Regnal. 33_Hen_8) <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/aip/Hen8/33/1/section/I.Section1>

⁷Shires, Henry M. "The Conflict between Queen Elizabeth and Roman Catholicism." *Church History* 16, no. 4 (1947): 221-33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3160951>.

⁸Edwards, R. Dudley, and T. W. Moody. "The History of Poynings' Law: Part I, 1494-1615." *Irish Historical Studies* 2, no. 8 (1941): 415-24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30006408>.

⁹The Humble Petition of the Roman Catholics of Ireland to the Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Pamphlets. Keating, Brown, 1805. <https://jstor.org/stable/60246986>.

¹⁰Eversley, G. Shaw-Lefevre (George Shaw-Lefevre). *Agrarian Tenures [electronic Resource]: A Survey of the Laws and Customs Relating to the Holding of Land in England, Ireland, and Scotland, and of the Reforms Therein during Recent Years / by G. Shaw Lefevre*. Cassell, 1893.

¹¹HC. TENANTS-AT-WILL (IRELAND) BILL. Deb 21 June 1848 vol 99 cc970-85 <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1848/jun/21/tenants-at-will-ireland-bill>

farmers refused to invest and renovate the land, which lowered its quality.¹² The poor soil would not support crops other than potatoes, which limited the Irish people's source of food. Historians agree, "[It] would be difficult to conceive a system more opposed to the prosperity and progress of an agricultural community."¹³ The British further gained benefits from Ireland by ordering the Irish to generate large amounts of agricultural products, which Britain imported from Ireland at low prices, which increased the profit for the British market. Thus, Britain's acts turned Ireland's agriculture into an unstable situation that was largely dependent on the export of products and the caprice of the landlords.

The British land-tenant system damaged Irish agriculture by forcing it to rely on potato plantations and thus led to the extreme poverty of the Irish, who had to survive on potatoes. Also, due to the land-tenant system, most of the Irish farmer's income was used to pay the rent.¹⁴ In 1821, a survey revealed that most Irish farmers complained that their rents were too high, especially because their income fluctuated between the good years and the bad years.¹⁵ This resulted in the Irish constantly suffering from poverty even after working for years. According to Irish politician Henry Grattan, around £800,000 was transferred annually to wealthy landlords while the Irish farmers were barely able to survive.¹⁶ The wealthiest gained more money while the poor could not hold money, a disaster for Irish society.¹⁷ Indeed, the Irish average living standards were "only about a third of the British on the eve of the Famine, a grim comparison that is dominated by rural poverty."¹⁸ The British landlords rented the farmlands to the Irish farmers and demanded an annual fee even when crops failed. The Irish farmers worked and sold manufactured goods to Britain to afford the rent, leaving nothing to purchase other foods to supplement their diets. As a result, they relied on potato plantations for all the most basic life requirements.

Both the broken agricultural system and the extreme poverty caused by the land-tenant system resulted in the over-reliance on potatoes. Since the potato was one of the only foods that could abundantly survive in the few poor lands that were owned by the Irish, it became the staple food of the Irish. Other crops, such as wheat, could not thrive and support the vast number of Irish farmers on the barren lands. The British occupation of rich soils forced the Irish farmers to depend on the potato as their main diet. In 1845, 4.7 million people out of a total of about 8.5 million depended on "potatoes as the predominant item in their diet."¹⁹ Before the famine, it was reported that "the average adult male of the labourer [*sic.*], cottier, or smallholder class, consumed 12 to 14 lb. of potatoes every day."²⁰ From the statistics, it is clear that the British confiscation of fertile land and the land-tenure system forced the Irish to depend heavily on potatoes to survive. The heavy reliance on the potatoes was the fatal factor during the famine, as almost all the potatoes were destroyed by the potato blight.

The arrival of *Phytophthora infestans*, commonly known as potato blight, was a catastrophe for Irish agriculture. The potato blight turned the potatoes black and rotten inside with withered leaves. It was impossible to eat these soggy and terribly smelling potatoes. In 1843, the potato blight first broke out in the U.S. and Canada. The blighted potatoes in New York spread the spores and brought the disease to Nova Scotia, where the disease traveled across the Atlantic Ocean by ships to Belgium in 1845. Since the potatoes in Europe were all introduced from the American continent, there was a bottleneck effect: all potatoes shared similar genes and few variations. The lack of gene diversity led to the situation that a virus harming one potato might be spreading and affecting all potatoes. Indeed, the British did not possess the knowledge and did not intentionally create or spread the disease. However, almost all the potato-growing countries in Europe, especially Ireland, which relied heavily on potatoes for their diet, suffered from a tremendous decrease in potato production and agricultural loss. In 1845, Ireland lost 50% of the potato yield, and there were "virtually no potatoes" in 1847.²¹ The potato blight not only impacted the potato plantation; in 1846, only 10% of crops produced a yield like standard years.²² Similar hazards of potato plantation occurred in other European countries as well. For example, the Netherlands' potato plantation per hectare decreased from 171.4 hl. in 1842 to only 61.5 hl. in 1846, an almost 65% decrease in potato crops.²³ However, the Netherlands did not suffer from famine or a population decrease. The population increased from 2.93 million in 1842 to 3.01 million in 1846, a stable population growth without being influenced by the potato blight.²⁴ The situation was utterly different in Ireland because the British land-tenant system did not decrease the

¹²Cynthia E. Smith, *The Land-Tenure System in Ireland: A Fatal Regime*, 76 Marq. L. Rev. 469 (1993).

¹³Eversley, G. Shaw-Lefevre (George Shaw-Lefevre). *Agrarian Tenures* [electronic Resource]: A Survey of the Laws and Customs Relating to the Holding of Land in England, Ireland, and Scotland, and of the Reforms Therein during Recent Years/by G. Shaw Lefevre. Cassell, 1893.

¹⁴Solar, Peter M., and Luc Hens. "Land under Pressure: The Value of Irish Land in a Period of Rapid Population Growth, 1730-1844." *The Agricultural History Review* 61, no. 1 (2013): 40-62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43698499>.

¹⁵W. Gregg, *General Report on the Gosford Estates in County Armagh 1821*

¹⁶Grattan, Henry, and Daniel Owen Madden. *The Speeches of the Right Hon. Henry Grattan*. Duffy, 1974.

¹⁷Dickson, David. *Studia Hibernica*, no. 17/18 (1977): 210-13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20496126>.

¹⁸Cormac O Grada, "'For Irishmen to Forget?' Recent Research on the Great Irish Famine," Working Paper No. WP88/7, Centre for Economic Research (1988)

¹⁹Burke, Austin. "The visitation of God?" *The Potato and the Great Irish Famine*. 1993.

²⁰Donnelly, James S. (2001). *The great Irish potato famine*. Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton.

²¹Cecil Woodham-Smith, 1962, pp. 91-93

²²Dwyer, Gerald P., and Cotton M. Lindsay. "Robert Giffen and the Irish Potato." *The American Economic Review* 74, no. 1 (1984): 188-92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1803318>.

²³BERGMAN, M. "THE POTATO BLIGHT IN THE NETHERLANDS AND ITS SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES (1845-1847)." *International Review of Social History* 12, no. 3 (1967): 390-431. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44581597>.

²⁴Methorst, H. W. "The New System of Population Accounting in the Netherlands." *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 31, no. 196 (1936): 719-22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2278669>.

demanded rent from the Irish farmers despite the significant losses on potatoes and crops, and this caused the Irish farmers' starvation.

The potato blight destroyed the already weak food cycle of Ireland, leading to the disastrous and massive mortality of the Irish. In Ireland, according to the maps,²⁵ reflecting the percentage of population per 100 acres of potatoes in 1845 and 1859, the population significantly decreased within 14 years of the Famine. Former large potato-growing counties like Derry, Cork, Mayo, Galway, and Dublin, which used to be densely populated areas, dropped their population from 200~300 to under 40 people per 100 acres of potatoes. As the Irish did not have other choices of food, most of the population starved to death, and this was known as the Irish Great Famine.²⁶The aforementioned data in the introduction shows that 30% of the overall population was lost during the famine. The population dropped to the lowest number in recorded Irish history.

Adding to the destruction of agriculture brought by the potato blight, the British eviction of farmers by the landlords significantly aggravated the situation. The land-tenant system deprived Irish farmers of productive land to grow their own food, which forced them to survive on potatoes. When the potato blight struck Ireland, the landlords did not return lands to the Irish for growing other food. Instead, because the Irish tenants could not afford the rent during the disaster, the British landlords evicted the farmers from their lands to protect their properties.²⁷One of the landlords said in 1852, "The destruction of the potato is a blessing to Ireland."²⁸ To collect more rent from the Irish who could still afford to pay, the aggressive landlords brought the evictions, which expelled the tenants from the land. Starting from 1849, according to the table recording evictions during the Famine,²⁹ about 200,000 people were expelled from their lands in the first two years. This number increased to 1,000,000 by the end of the famine, accounting for about 15% of the Irish population. Their cottages were destroyed, and all their properties were confiscated by the landlords, immorally preventing the return of the Irish farmers. Knowing that the potato blight had destroyed all the potatoes, the evictions were a brutal and intentional murder of the Irish by the British. The expelled farmers lost their money, food, and even shelter to survive. The scene was vividly conveyed, "In many places, the wretched people were seated on the fences of their decaying gardens, wringing their hands and wailing bitterly [at] the destruction that had left them foodless."³⁰The eviction of the starving and vulnerable Irish farmers was an immoral act of the British landlords. Although they were permitted by the law to do this, it was unforgivable that the British landlords forced out the farmers while knowing they would die from starvation. The evictions significantly increased the number of deaths during the Famine, and these atrocities would not end up without rebellion and backlash from the Irish people.

In response to the evictions, the Irish farmers rebelled against the landlords. One of the most notorious events was the murder of Major Denis Mahon in November 1847.³¹He had evicted over 3,000 persons, which was about 605 families before he was slain by the rebels.³²To maintain his profit and get rid of the tenants who could not afford the rent during the disaster, Mahon aimed at the poorest tenants as he believed their departure "would relieve the industrious tenant."³³More than a quarter of the people perished after being expelled, and the survivors were described by the medical officers as "the most wretched and diseased [they] had ever seen."³⁴On 2 November 1847, the evicted Irish tenants waited by the road and shot Major Mahon on his way riding home. The Irish also lit bonfires on the hills to celebrate the death of Mahon.³⁵ A series of murders happened to the landlords after the death of Mahon, such as the murder of John Lloyd, another landlord who persecuted the Irish farmers during the Famine.³⁶The eviction of tenants and the murders of the landlord became "the focus of an extensive journalistic controversy that polarized political and cultural attitudes on both sides of the Irish Sea."³⁷

The conflict soon rose to a furor and ended up with great hostility between the British and Irish as religious and political accusations proliferated. Because they believed the Famine was the punishment of God, the British Protestants blamed the Irish Catholics for their own tragedy. In a public letter addressed to the Archbishop of Dublin, the British Protestants accused the Catholic leader of Ireland of denouncing Mahon from the altar before he was shot,³⁸ even though

²⁵Bourke, P. M. Austin (1960). "The Extent of the Potato Crop in Ireland at the Time of the Famine," Dublin: Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland, Dublin: Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland, XX, Part III: 1-35, ISSN 0081-4776, archived (PDF) from the original on 14 May 2011, retrieved 10 July 202

²⁶Guinnane, Timothy W. "The Great Irish Famine and Population: The Long View." *The American Economic Review* 84, no. 2 (1994): 303-8. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2117848>.

²⁷D. James p.149

²⁸J.S. Donnelly, Jr., "'Irish property must pay for Irish poverty': British public opinion and the great famine" in Christopher Morash and Richard Hayes (eds), 'Fearful realities': new perspectives on the famine (Dublin and Portland, Oregon, 1996), pp. 60-76.

²⁹ D. James, p.142

³⁰*Correspondence explanatory of the measures adopted by Her Majesty's government for the relief of distress arising from the failure of the potato crop in Ireland, from July 1846 to January 1847 (commissariat series), p. 4., xxxvii, 57.*

³¹S.J. Campbell, *The great Irish famine: Words and images from the Famine Museum, Strokestown Park, County Roscommon (Strokestown, 1994)*, pp. 39-50.

³²J.S. Donnelly, Jr., 'Mass eviction and the great famine' in Cathal Póirtéir (ed.), *The Great Irish Famine (Cork & Dublin, 1995)*, pp. 164-71.

³³Campbell, *Great Irish famine*, pp. 40-1.

³⁴ Oliver MacDonagh, 'Irish overseas emigration during the famine' in Edwards & Williams, *Great famine*, p. 336-7

³⁵Duffy, Peter. (2007). *The killing of Major Denis Mahon: a mystery of old Ireland*. New York, NY: Harper.

³⁶ Duffy, Peter. (2007). *The killing of Major Denis Mahon: a mystery of old Ireland*. New York, NY: Harper.

³⁷D. James p.144

³⁸*Morning Chronicle*, 4 January 1848.

the actions of Mahon deserved the criticism of the Father. The *Nation* newspaper of Ireland wrote in January 1848: "Every line that has been written in the English papers for the last two months proved that 'the English charge the whole priesthood with instigations to murder.'"³⁹ Edward Nangle, who founded the Protestant missions on Achill Island, stated, "God is angry with this land. The potatoes would not have rotted unless He sent the rot into them...God is good, and because He is, He never sends a scourge upon His creatures unless they deserve it."⁴⁰ The Irish were blamed by the British for being unfaithful to their religion, which soured the already antagonistic religious relationships. This resulted in even more evictions of Irish farmers by the British landlords. The dispossessed families gathered into the few leftover cottages "till the disease is generated, and they are then thrown out, without consideration or mercy."⁴¹ Indeed, the potato blight was a natural disaster, but the British policies, which forced the Irish to rely solely on potatoes as a food source, were an immoral act. Moreover, it is unethical that the landlords evicted the innocent Irish farmers into barren lands and heartlessly watched them die from starvation. The brutal eviction was an inarguably intentional murder done by the British, revealing the immoral side of the British landlords.

4. Britain's Intentional Draining of Ireland's Economy and Agriculture

The harms of the tenant system were aggravated by British economic policies in Ireland, especially as these involved Irish livestock and animal products. In the late eighteenth century, the transactions of cattle and livestock became popular in Britain. The number of cattle sold in London was around 110,000, and the average number sold from 1770 to 1794 approximately increased by 32 percent over the average of 1732 to 1736,⁴² but these numbers only display the demands for cattle in London, a small portion of the British cattle requirements. In other words, the British had a tremendous demand for livestock. However, under such large demands, there were only about 5,220,000 cattle owned by the British.⁴³ The British livestock demands significantly outstripped the domestic supplies, potentially leading to significant price increases for cattle and related products.

To solve the domestic crisis of the short supply of livestock, the British government aimed to utilize Irish lands to meet the animal husbandry demands in Britain. After signing the Act of Union in 1800, Britain turned Ireland into its own private backyard full of natural and human resources to meet British demands. As evidence of British control in Ireland, around 90% of Ireland's agricultural land was used for hay and pasture production.⁴⁴ This means the British monopolized the Irish farmlands, holding the absolute right to determine the major crop choice of Irish agriculture. Besides dominating the choice of agriculture in Ireland, the British also forced the Irish to sell most of their agricultural and animal products to Britain at low prices. This direct lowering of Irish incomes, combined with inflated high rents and the forcing of the Irish to live on potato plantations in barren lands, left the Irish people in a precarious position. Nevertheless, forcing the Irish to export their products to only Britain would merely be the first step for the British to exploit Ireland in favor of their own interests.

As a direct consequence of the British oppression, the Irish economy changed from a self-sufficient agricultural system to a commercial-based economy, relying on exporting animal products to Britain. The British desire for livestock profoundly impacted the distribution of industries in Ireland.⁴⁵ Evidence for the exportation change was that grazing livestock production and manufacturing accounted for about 53% of exports from Ireland to Britain.⁴⁶ The data means that manufacturing and animal husbandry became the top business in Irish exports. To fulfill the British demands for livestock, the animal industry became the major industry of Ireland's economy. The impact lasts today. In 2001, total livestock output was valued at €2 billion, with cattle and milk each accounting for around 40%.⁴⁷

The reliance of the Irish economy on manufacturing and exporting livestock products to Britain is easily seen in the distribution of their occupations. The textile industry was a direct product of utilizing wool from sheep, which is a significant livestock export. The statistics regarding the occupations in Ireland in 1841 showed that nearly 79.4% of females and 66% of the Irish population devoted time to textiles.⁴⁸ The data shows that manufacturing and animal husbandry targeting exportation to Britain became the most popular jobs in Ireland, which accounted for most of the employment.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the transition to the overdependence on British economics would not end without cost. The greed and selfishness of the British government would be revealed as its policies further caused the Irish economy to

³⁹Nation, 8 January 1848.

⁴⁰Byrne, Patricia. *The Preacher and the Prelate: The Achill Mission Colony and the Battle for Souls in Famine Ireland*. Co. Kildare, Ireland: Merrion Press, 2018.

⁴¹Kennedy to poor law commissioners, 30 March 1848, sixth series, 1848, p. 823, H.C. 1847-8,

⁴²Fussell, G. E. "Animal Husbandry in Eighteenth-Century England: Part 1." *Agricultural History*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1937, pp. 96-116. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3739670>. Accessed on 8 July 2022.

⁴³Fussell, G. E. pp. 96-98. JSTOR

⁴⁴Fussell, G. E. pp. 106-116. JSTOR

⁴⁵Curran, Declan. "'Articles of Practical Banking Written by Practical Bankers': The Bankers' Magazine Reportage of the Great Irish Famine." *Irish Economic and Social History* 43, no. 1 (2016): 21-49. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26375944>.

⁴⁶ "Ireland - Animal Husbandry." *Encyclopedia of the Nations*, www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Europe/Ireland-ANIMAL-HUSBANDRY.html.

⁴⁷ "Ireland - Animal Husbandry." *Encyclopedia of the Nations*, www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Europe/Ireland-ANIMAL-HUSBANDRY.html.

⁴⁸ Bielenberg, A, and F Geary (2006). "Growth in manufacturing output in Ireland between the Union and the Famine: Some evidence," *Explorations in Economic History* 43: 110-52.

⁴⁹Solar, Peter M. "Shipping and Economic Development in Nineteenth-Century Ireland." *The Economic History Review*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2006, pp. 717-42. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4121958>. Accessed on 9 July 2022.

deteriorate during the Famine.

Problems occurred during the famine when the Irish faced challenges from the French regarding the exportation of agricultural products, which forced them to lower the selling price. The French ground the wheat imported from the Mediterranean ports and sold it to England at a similar or slightly lower price than Ireland. According to the table of imports, British imports from France in the seven months of 1850 already exceeded the whole of 1849 by 1,080,089 quintals, an increase of 54%.⁵⁰By facing the dilemma of competition and lower yield on the wheat plantation, the Irish profits from exports to Britain decreased tremendously in 1850.⁵¹As a result, the Irish economy, which was greatly dependent on exports to Britain, was harmed directly.

The British government was notified that exports from Ireland to Britain had decreased significantly, which might endanger the Irish economy. This was demonstrated in a parliament meeting on 15 July 1851, when Senator Lord Nass, who was responsible for the Irish economy, presented a speech regarding the Milling and Agricultural Trade in Ireland. In the speech, he explained, "In 1845, the exports of wheat from Ireland amounted to 372,000 quarters, whereas in 1850 they were only 76,000 quarters; the exports of wheatmeal and flour were 1,422,000 cwts., but in 1850 they had fallen to 327,000 cwts."⁵²The agricultural yield available for exportation significantly decreased as a byproduct of the beginning of the Famine. Usually, the decrease in percentage yield should be compensated by a rise in selling price. However, the competition of exports from France hindered the price increase, which resulted in the loss of profits. The entire loss to the Irish, compared with a few years before, "would be equal in the whole to 2,600,000l or one-sixth of the entire valuation of the country, and this probably far below the reality."

Senator Nass voiced that actions should be taken to help Ireland, stating that "its entire loss may soon be looked for unless something is done to avert the blow."⁵³In the British Parliament, he claimed, "One of the greatest interests of Ireland is now actually on the brink of ruin, and therefore I feel that I should ill discharge my duty to my constituents, and my country, did I not avail myself of the earliest opportunity of laying before this House the circumstances of this alarming case."⁵⁴With the report of Nass, the British Parliament was informed that Ireland's yield and the amount that they were exporting were decreasing annually during the Famine along with its profit on agricultural products.

According to the Act of Union 1800, there was only one parliament, the parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The Parliament was mainly controlled by the British government, with few Irish peers and nobles who managed Ireland's development and exportation.⁵⁵As part of the Act, the British government should be responsible for the development of Ireland while they could utilize the resources of Ireland as part of its own nation. From the eighth figure in Peter M. Solar's research⁵⁶, a large portion of crops and livestock were imported by the British at a low price. While the British enjoyed the benefits of Irish agriculture, they also indeed held the responsibility to take care of Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. There should be no discrimination against Ireland, and the British should guarantee Ireland received the same protection as other parts of the nation. Nevertheless, when Ireland reported the loss in exports and the decrease in yield, the British rejected the request for a compensating price rise to protect Irish agricultural exports. The British Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, argued that Britain should follow laissez-faire policies, which suggested that the government should not intervene in the market. As the colonial administrator, Sir Charles Trevelyan stated the British attitude toward Ireland and the reason for not providing help: "We attach the highest public importance to the strict observance of our pledge not to send orders abroad, which would come into competition with our merchants and upset all their calculations; these principles must be kept in view in reference to what is now going on in Skibbereen. For numerous people like the Irish to be fed from foreign countries is a thing unheard of." Cynically, the British had signed the Act and announced, "Great Britain and Ireland shall upon 1 January 1801, be united into one kingdom; and that the titles appertaining to the crown, &c. shall be such as his Majesty shall be pleased to appoint."⁵⁷While the British were not willing to be responsible for treating the Irish as their own citizens, the British had never declared that Ireland was another nation when the British were importing agricultural products and livestock from Ireland before the Famine. The British government's negligence as Ireland faced clear challenges in its export economy exacerbated economic conditions in Ireland and made the famine even worse for those already suffering.

As a result, the Irish economy and agriculture were destroyed by the British laissez-faire policies, which were, in fact, abandoning Ireland after draining all the potential profits. Britain refused to help the Irish economy by stating that their policies were based on laissez-faire. However, the British government actually intervened in the Irish market in a negative manner. Instead of rising, Irish wheat prices "began to slump badly in 1848, and by 1851, they were as much as one-third lower than they had been as recently as 1847."⁵⁸In response, the British decided to import even more French products and forced down the Irish price in 1852, which allowed the British to eventually import a large number of Irish

⁵⁰Milling Trade, Nass 802

⁵¹Gray, Peter. "Famine and Land in Ireland and India, 1845-1880: James Caird and the Political Economy of Hunger." *The Historical Journal*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2006, pp. 193-215. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4091745>. Accessed on 2 September 2022.

⁵²Nass, Milling Trade, HC Deb 15 July 1851 vol 118 cc795-833, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1851/jul/15/milling-trade-ireland>

⁵³Milling Trade, Nass, P1

⁵⁴Milling Trade, Nass 10

⁵⁵Acts of the Parliament of Great Britain 1800 c. 67 (Regnal. 39_and_40_Geo_3) Whole Act <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/apgb/Geo3/39-40/67>

⁵⁶Solar, Peter M. "Shipping and Economic Development in Nineteenth-Century Ireland." *The Economic History Review*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2006, pp. 717-42. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4121958>. Accessed on 9 July 2022.

⁵⁷Act of Union 1800, Article First

⁵⁸D. James p.67

products at an extremely low price. The tumbling profit incited a tremendous abandonment of wheat farming in Ireland. From 1847 to 1852, the land cultivated for wheat plummeted from 744,000 to under 354,000 acres, which was about a 52 percent decrease.⁵⁹The tenants had to pay the landlords a fixed amount of rent despite the tremendously decreasing income from exports. This exacerbated the situation of the Famine as most Irish farmers suffered from poverty since they could not earn money from the exports while having to pay high rent to the landlords. These factors resulted in even higher mortality during the Famine as both the economy and agriculture were broken with not enough food and wealth to support the population. The inhumane British policies, which drained the Irish economy, resulted in a decrease in the Irish population during and even after the Famine.

5. The Racist British Government without Social Justice

During the Famine, not only did Ireland not receive the deserved adjustments from the British to stabilize its economy and agriculture, but it was drained, exploited, and abandoned by the British after the British enjoyed all the benefits. Some famous historians acknowledge that the British government's aggressive attitudes during the potato blight turned a disease into a famine, which indirectly led to a national disaster. Among the reputable scholars, A.J.P. Taylor was one of the most distinguished and controversial British historians of the 20th century. His review of *The Great Famine* was printed under the title "Genocide."⁶⁰In this famous work, Taylor declares that all of "Ireland was a Belsen," referencing the notorious German extermination camp. He then claims that "the English governing class had the blood of two million Irish people on its hands." These statements are not radical and malicious speculation about the British government but rather are based on the facts of what happened during the Irish Great Famine, a catastrophic genocide. One of the pieces of evidence comes from the recollections of Benjamin Jowett referring to Nassau Senior, who was the economic advisor of the British government during the famine. In the recollection, Nassau Senior claims, "I have always felt a certain horror of political economists since I heard one of them say that the famine in Ireland would not kill more than a million people, and that would scarcely be enough to do much good."⁶¹In other words, Nassau Senior believed that it would be a pity if the famine did not kill more than a million people. Nassau Senior was not the only British governor during the Great Famine who showed an aggressive attitude toward the Irish. Thomas Malthus, the influential political economist in Britain, spoke to the public, "The land in Ireland is infinitely more peopled than in England; and to give full effect to the natural resources of the country, a great part of the population should be swept from the soil."⁶²By stating these aggressive speeches in public, the British political economists intended to encourage the British government and citizens not to rescue the starving Irish and even utilize the famine to destroy the Irish.

The racist attitude toward the Irish was widely promoted by British media and politicians. The British popularized the action of not considering the Irish as British citizens through their newspapers. A scholar and well-known historian states, "The assumption that the 'native Irish' was alien in race and inferior in culture to the Anglo-Saxons persisted."⁶³The British media used words like "wildly temperamental and even schizophrenic," "childish, emotionally unstable, ignorant, indolent, superstitious, primitive or semi-civilized, dirty, vengeful, and violent" to describe the Irish people, and this description would have been widely accepted by the British public.⁶⁴To be more specific, the British believed that the Irish were barbarians and the direct opposite of the British citizens. This racist stereotype of the Irish was widely spread through the *Medical Times and Gazette*, the most influential newspaper of that time, and thus widely believed by the British citizenry. Richard Lebow's *White Britain and Black Ireland*, published in 1968, strongly certify the racist attitude of the British during the famine: "Anti-Irish sentiment was widespread among almost all segments of the British population ... Widespread and virulent expressions of anti-Irish prejudice predate the Industrial Revolution. They had been part of the British scene for centuries. Racist expressions were merely the age-old anti-Irish prejudice couched in the jargon of the day. The attitude was in no way qualitatively distinct from the derision and fear of the Irish which preceded it."⁶⁵The pre-existing racist attitude toward the Irish influenced the public reactions and opinions during the Famine. The Duke of Cambridge stated in 1846, "Rotten potatoes and seaweed, or even grass, properly mixed, afforded a very wholesome and nutritious food. All knew that Irishmen could live upon anything, and there was plenty of grass in the field though the potato crop should [*sic*] fail."⁶⁶By treating and considering the Irish as people worse than them, the British people contributed to the indifferent policies, which resulted in the deaths of the Irish.

Just before the Famine, the British Parliament had passed the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834, which enabled "the setting-up of workhouses under the care of Boards of Guardians,"⁶⁷but the British government, lacking a view towards

⁵⁹Returns of agricultural produce in Ireland in the year 1847, pt i: Crops, p. vi [923], H.C. 1847-8, lvii, 6; Returns of agricultural produce, 1853, pp. vii, xii; Thomas Barrington, 'A review of Irish agricultural prices,' *Stat. Soc. Ire. Jn.*, xv, pt 101 (Oct. 1927), p. 251

⁶⁰Donnelly, James S. (2001). *The great Irish potato famine*. Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton

⁶¹A.J.P. Taylor, *Essays in English history* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1976), pp. 73, 75, 78.

⁶²Ricardo, David, and Piero Sraffa. *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo. 1816-1818*. University Press, for the Royal Economic Society, 1973.

⁶³Mary D. Condon, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England*. By L. P. Curtis, Jr. [Studies in British History and Culture, Volume II.] (Bridgeport, Conn.: Conference on British Studies at the University of Bridgeport. Distributed by New York University Press, New York. 1968. Pp. 162.)

⁶⁴Lengel, Edward G. *The Irish through British Eyes Perceptions of Ireland in the Famine Era*. Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2002.

⁶⁵Lebow, Richard Ned. 1968. *White Britain and black Ireland: the Anglo-Irish colonial relationship*.

⁶⁶Connolly, S.J. "Daniel O'Connell, the British Press and the Irish Famine: Killing Remarks." *Albion* 36, no. 3 (2004): 573+. Gale Academic OneFile (accessed on 17 July, 2022). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A132762455/AONE?u=googlescholar&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=5f270bdb>

⁶⁷Keneally, Thomas. *Three Famines Starvation and Politics*. Public Affairs, 2011.

social justice, violated the Poor Law in Ireland because they valued economic interests over millions of lives. The Act was supposed to encourage the poor to work hard to support themselves, which could reduce the cost of looking after the poor. It ensured that "the poor were housed in workhouses, clothed and fed. Children who entered the workhouse would receive some schooling."⁶⁸The British declared before that Ireland was part of its nation, which meant that the Poor Law should also apply to the Irish. Nevertheless, the British government allowed the landlords to evict nearly a million poor Irish farmers from their lands and workhouses during the famine. The British considered Ireland part of the empire when it was beneficial to the British and abandoned the Irish when they required help. In *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, James Donnelly concludes, "The government's abject failure to stop or even slow down the clearances [evictions] contributed in a major way to enshrining the idea of English state-sponsored genocide in Irish popular mind."⁶⁹The British government did not value the interests of humanity and social justice. The economic policies it followed were lethal to Ireland, leading to the genocide.

Supporting the claim that the British generated the Irish Great Famine, some authorities and historians publicly blame the British government. In 1996, New Jersey included the famine in the "Holocaust and Genocide Curriculum" of its secondary schools' history courses.⁷⁰The curriculum was promoted by Irish-American political groups and supported by professors Charles E. Rice and Francis Boyle as appropriate in the curriculum. Nevertheless, the curriculum was not supported by everyone. Irish historian Cormac Ó Gráda argued that genocide includes "murderous intent," and he believed that "not even the most bigoted and racist commentators of the day sought the extermination of the Irish."⁷¹Gráda's statement could be refuted as the British acts of evicting the Irish tenants to starvation and death were revealed. According to Article II of the Genocide Convention signed in 1948, one of the definitions of genocide is "Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group or deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part."⁷⁰The British confiscated the land, evicted the farmers, and forced down the price of Irish exportations during the Famine, which resulted in the breakdown of both the economy and agriculture in Ireland. These actions were concluded as a series of deliberate "race- and ethnicity-based" policies to destroy the Irish. These policies of generating massive starvation in Ireland amounted to genocide according to the definition of genocide in Article II.⁷¹

6. Aftermaths and Legacies: Emigration of the Population

The Famine resulted in an increase in emigration from Ireland, and about 60% of the population was lost.⁷²The Irish either migrated to nearby countries or to the American continent. To understand the severity of the effects of the Famine under the extreme poverty caused by British persecution, it would be important to note that migration was not the first choice of most of the Irish. The cost to emigrate was high and the health conditions upon the boats were low; for example, in 1847, there were about 100,000 people attempting to cross the ocean to Canada. However, up to 20,000 Irish died during the journey from disease and malnutrition. Their vessels, which were known as 'coffin ships,' were overcrowded and poorly maintained. The Irish sneaked from the small and unregulated harbors in the West of Ireland at the cost of high mortality.⁷³Although the health conditions were terrible and people died while fleeing, most of the young Irish succeeded in migrating to neighboring countries. Moreover, since the younger members of families often started emigration, this eventually became a rite of passage in modern Ireland as young Irish adults left their hometowns to prove their courage and ability.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the emigration of the younger population also accounted for the rapid population decrease after the Famine. Much of the Irish population left behind in Ireland was older people who were not capable of producing offspring to increase the population. This result can be seen by 1931 when the population reached the minimum of 4.21 million, almost a 50% decrease from the 8.18 million populations in 1841 before the famine.

Emigration destinations were widespread throughout the world. Around 250,000 people successfully migrated away from western Ireland in the worst year of the famine.⁷⁵As a result, a quarter of the population in Liverpool was Irish in 1851. In 1847, 38,000 Irish arrived in Toronto, which itself had only a population under 20,000.⁷⁶During the five years of the Famine, around 700,000 Irish migrated to Canada and the U.S., accounting for 67% of the entire migrating population.⁷⁷ They brought their agricultural and manufacturing skills with them into the U.S., which helped them to find an occupation for life. The rapid emigration of the Irish accounted for the modern distribution of their descendants. In 1930, there were already more than 45 million Irish in the United States and in the 2019 American Community Survey,

⁶⁸ The National Archives. 2017. 1834 Poor Law - The National Archives. [online] Available at: <<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/1834-poor-law/#external-links>> [Accessed on 16 July 2021].

⁶⁹Donnelly, James S. (2005). *The Great Irish Potato Famine*, Sutton Publishing, ISBN 0-7509-2632-5

⁷⁰General Assembly resolution 260 A (III), Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 9 December 1948, United Nations <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-prevention-and-punishment-crime-genocide>

⁷¹Mullin, James V. *The New Jersey Famine Curriculum: a report* *Eire-Ireland: Journal of Irish Studies*, Spring-Summer, 2002

⁷²Guinnane, Timothy W. "The Great Irish Famine and Population: The Long View." *The American Economic Review*, vol. 84, no. 2, 1994, pp. 303-08. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2117848>. Accessed on 25 September 2022.

⁷³Woodham-Smith, Cecil, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849*, Penguin, 1991 [1962], ISBN 978-0-14-014515-1

⁷⁴Foster, R. F. (1988). *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, Penguin Group

⁷⁵Library of Congress (2007), Irish immigration to America, archived from the original on 11 May 2020,

⁷⁶Winder, Gordon M. *Trouble in the North End: The Geography of Social Violence in Saint John 1840-1860*

⁷⁷"Irish immigration to the United States of America 1815-1850". DR.Michał Lesniewski. Faculty of History University of Warsaw. OCT 2014.P.252-253

9.7% of the American citizens identified themselves as Irish Americans.⁷⁸The Irish Great Famine impacted the diversity of much of the world, but especially modern America.

7. Conclusion

The Irish Great Famine was not only a natural disaster but also one of the most severe calamities caused by laissez-faire economic policies and a lack of social justice throughout history. Social Justice, the moral integrity between societies, ensures fair opportunity for social privileges and rights, which is crucial to the stability and humanity of worldwide society. Nevertheless, during the Irish Great Famine, the British deprived Irish farmers of their right to survive generated conditions without enough food support. On the prospect of the Irish economy, the British chose to follow laissez-faire policies, which guaranteed the highest profit for the British but neglected to help Ireland, which was also part of the United Kingdom at that time. The British only attempted to exploit the Irish for their own interests without considering the ramifications for the Irish, even during an apparent natural disaster that was endangering the race. This was a violation of social justice, both morally and ethically, that led to severe repercussions. The tragedy of the Irish Famine underscores the absolute necessity of protecting vulnerable groups in political decisions, even when it means lowering some of the profits. The lack of social justice in the British government led to the murder of Irish citizens who deserved to share the same rights as British citizens.

Overall, the British government's connivance with landlords evicting the Irish farmers, suppression of Irish economic incomes, and racism toward the Irish people all suggest that the Irish Great Famine was not only a natural disaster but also a genocide. The millions who died during the Irish Famine are a wake-up example to the world of the importance of social justice and humanitarianism when finding a balance between the benefits of developing self-interest and the dangers of over-exploiting human and natural resources.

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