



KEY FAMINES AND PERIODS OF FOOD SHORTAGE DISCUSSED IN THE LEARNING PROGRAMME

» GREAT IRISH FAMINE (1845–52)

The Irish Famine, also known as the Great Famine or the Potato Famine, happened between 1845 and 1852. It mainly occurred because the potato crop failed across the country, which was the staple food of the Irish population. A disease called late blight destroyed the potato harvests for several years in a row, not just in Ireland, but also in Scotland, Flanders, the Netherlands and Germany. British colonial policies made things worse in Ireland, by increasing poverty and dependence on the potato crop prior to the famine, and by not providing sufficient relief during the crisis. As a result of the famine, about one million people died from hunger and sickness, and more than a million people emigrated from Ireland in search of survival and a better life elsewhere.

» FINNISH GREAT HUNGER YEARS (1866–68)

In Finland, a series of bad harvests due to poor weather led to the 'Great Years of Hunger' from 1866 to 1868. However, these followed a period of already ongoing food shortage. Crop failures led to a shortage of food supplies, particularly grains like rye, which was a staple in the Finnish diet. The government's slow response and insufficient relief measures resulted in the devastating famine. About 8–9% of the people in Finland at that time, estimated at around 150,000 in total, died from hunger and related illnesses.

» FOOD INSECURITY IN GERMANY 1914–1924

During and after World War I, Germany experienced food insecurity due to economic warfare, including a blockade. Agriculture suffered because there were not enough workers, animals for farming, land to grow crops, and coal for moving and processing food. On top of that, hyperinflation made money worth less, so buying basic things became really hard. All these problems combined led to hundreds of thousands of civilians dying from diseases related to hunger and malnutrition.

» UKRAINIAN HOLODOMOR (1932–33)

Due to agricultural reforms and economic policies implemented under Joseph Stalin, in 1932 there was famine in parts of the Soviet Union, including parts of Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. In late 1932 and early 1933, policies specifically directed at Soviet Ukraine were put in place: unrealistically high food quotas, forced food requisitions and the restriction of (internal) movement, for example. As a result, the famine in Ukraine became much worse. Estimates of how many people died vary widely, but scholars generally agree that about 4 million people in Ukraine lost their lives due to starvation and related causes. The Holodomor has been recognized as a genocide by several states including Ukraine, Canada, the US, as well as the European Parliament.

» SPANISH HUNGER YEARS (1939–52)

After the civil war in Spain, from 1939 to 1952, there was a long period of hunger, hitting the poorest people in the south especially hard. The worst "hunger years" (1939–42 and 1946) were a real famine, comparable to those in other European contexts during the 19th and 20th century. Franco's dictatorship blamed it on the previous Republican government and damages from the civil war, along with Spain being isolated internationally and the occurrence of continuous drought. However, studies show the true cause was Franco's very strict economic policies that lasted a long time. The consequences for the impoverished population were malnutrition, starvation, disease and poor housing conditions. To survive, people came up with new ways to make food and sometimes did illegal things like black market trading, stealing, and smuggling.

» THE HIGHLAND POTATO FAMINE (1846–56)

The Highland Potato Famine struck Scotland from 1846 to 1856, devastating communities that relied heavily on potatoes as a staple food. The crisis was triggered by potato blight, the same disease that caused the Irish Famine, destroying successive potato crops across the Highlands and Islands.

The famine led to widespread starvation and destitution among Highland communities. It accelerated the Highland Clearances, with many landlords evicting tenants who could no longer pay rent. Around 1.7 million Scots emigrated during this period, primarily to North America and Australia. The crisis also marked the end of the traditional Highland clan system and crofting lifestyle, permanently transforming Highland society and culture.

» DUTCH 'HUNGER WINTER' (1944–45)

During the final months of World War II, the German-occupied western Netherlands went through a severe famine known as the 'Hunger Winter'. The famine resulted from several transportation and distribution difficulties linked to the Allied liberation of the southern Netherlands, including a national railway strike, a German embargo on inland shipping, severe fuel shortage and a heavy frost period. Over 20,000 people died during the famine.



» GREEK FAMINE (1941–44)

The famine in Greece during World War II was caused by a combination of factors. These include the occupation by Axis powers, disruption of food supplies, inflation, communication break-down and the Allied blockade that prevented food and resources from entering the country. The number of people who died during this famine is thought to be between 100,000 and 450,000.

» FOOD INSECURITY IN GERMANY (1945–49)

After World War II, Germany faced hunger and food insecurity mainly due to the widespread destruction of its infrastructure, farms, and cities during the war. The extensive Allied bombings and combat inflicted widespread destruction on the country, making it hard to produce and move food around. This situation caused hunger not only for people living in Germany but also for various groups on the move, such as displaced persons, refugees, individuals who fled the former eastern part of Germany, and former concentration camp prisoners.

» THE ETHIOPIAN FAMINE (1983-1985)

The Ethiopian famine of 1983–85 was a devastating humanitarian crisis that claimed an estimated 400,000 to 500,000 lives, primarily in the northern regions of Tigray and Wollo. The disaster resulted from a combination of severe drought and political factors, including the government's prioritization of military spending in civil conflicts and disruptive agricultural policies like forced collectivisation.

Beyond the massive death toll, the famine displaced millions into refugee camps and captured global attention through powerful media coverage. This sparked an unprecedented international response. The crisis left lasting impacts on Ethiopian society through widespread malnutrition, disrupted communities, and accelerated urbanization, while transforming how the world responds to humanitarian disasters.

» THE YEMEN FAMINE 2016-PRESENT

The Yemen famine, ongoing since 2016, represents one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. It emerged primarily due to the civil war between the Houthi rebels and the Saudi-led coalition supporting Yemen's government. The conflict has severely disrupted food supplies, destroyed infrastructure, and blocked humanitarian aid.

The crisis was intensified by port blockades, particularly at Hodeidah, which prevented essential food and medical supplies from reaching the population. Economic collapse, including currency devaluation and rising food prices, has further worsened the situation.

The effects have been catastrophic, with an estimated 375,000 deaths by the end of 2021. Millions face severe food insecurity, and children are particularly vulnerable, with widespread malnutrition causing stunted growth and development. The crisis has also led to outbreaks of diseases like cholera due to limited access to clean water and healthcare.



GLOSSARY OF KEY CONCEPTS, WORDS AND DEFINITIONS

AGENCY

Agency: An individual's capacity to act independently, make choices, and exert influence over their own life circumstances and social environment.

COMMEMORATION

Commemoration is the act of honoring and preserving the memory of significant events, people, or achievements through ceremonies, monuments, or other forms of public remembrance.

DISPLACEMENT

Displacement refers to the forced relocation of individuals or communities from their homes or native regions due to conflict, natural disasters, development projects, or persecution.

GENDERED

Gendered refers to how social and cultural expectations, roles, behaviors, or experiences are shaped and influenced by gender-based assumptions and societal norms.

HERITAGE

Heritage refers to the cultural, historical, and physical elements inherited from past generations, including traditions, customs, buildings, and artifacts that form a community's shared identity.

HYPERLOCAL

Hyperlocal refers to information, activities, or focus that is concentrated on an extremely specific geographic area, typically at the neighborhood or community level.

MEMORY

Memory in a cultural context refers to the collective recollection and sharing of historical events, traditions, and experiences passed down through generations within communities.

MEMORIALISATION

Memorialisation is the process of preserving and honoring memories of people, events, or experiences through physical monuments, rituals, ceremonies, or other forms of public remembrance.

MIGRATION

Migration is the movement of people, animals, or groups from one area or country to another, either temporarily or permanently, typically in search of better conditions.

PHILANTHROPY

Philanthropy is the practice of donating money, resources, or time to help improve the lives of others, typically through organised charitable giving and social initiatives. It may be led by individuals, religious groups, and non-governmental organisations, amongst others.

POWER

The ability to influence, control, or direct the behavior and circumstances of others through political, economic, or social means.

REFUGEE

A refugee is a person forced to flee their home country due to persecution, war, violence, or disasters, seeking safety and protection in another country.

SOCIAL CLASS

A person's position within a societal hierarchy based on economic status, education, occupation, and cultural capital that influences their opportunities and life experiences.

SOLIDARITY

Solidarity is the unity and mutual support between individuals or groups based on shared interests, goals, or circumstances, often expressed through collective action and mutual assistance.

