



MODULE 1: WHAT IS FAMINE?



LESSON ONE WHAT IS FAMINE?

LESSON DESCRIPTION

This lesson will help inform students about the various causes of famine, serving as an introduction to famine history in select countries across the world. The lesson will look at common themes in how different famines have occurred and enable students to understand their complexities, drawing comparisons between different crises. The lesson will incorporate case studies and discussion of the following famines:

- » The Great Irish Famine (1845-1852)
- » The Great Bengal Famine (1943)
- » The Nigerian Famine (1967-1970)
- » The Ethiopian Famine (1983-1985)
- » Food Insecurity in Germany (1914-1924)
- » The Dutch Hunger Winter (1944-45)
- » The Ukrainian Holodomor (1932-33)
- » The Finnish Great Hunger Years (1866-68)



LESSON INTENTIONS

- ✓ To understand what is meant by the term famine.
- ✓ To discuss how and why famine has occurred in different countries.
- ✓ Understand some of the main conditions that have led to famine.



LESSON OUTCOMES

- ✓ Demonstrate a broad understanding of famine and recognise some of the complexities in defining what a famine is.
- ✓ Be able to list a number of conditions that may lead to famine.



USEFUL ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION

[Global Famine Case Studies](#)

[Online Heritages of Hunger Repository](#)

[Online Heritages of Hunger Exhibition](#)

Additional study stimulus to that included in the module can be found here:

[The Great Frost \(Ireland 1740-41\)](#)

[Scottish Potato Famine](#)

[The Greek Famine \(1941-44\)](#)



CAUSES OF FAMINE

Famines have plagued human societies throughout history, causing immeasurable suffering and loss of life. These devastating events often result from a complex interplay of various factors, generally rooted in natural, economic, political, and social conditions. Understanding the causes of historical famines is crucial for preventing future occurrences and mitigating their impact. In this lesson, we will delve into some of the primary causes of historic famines.

DEFINITION

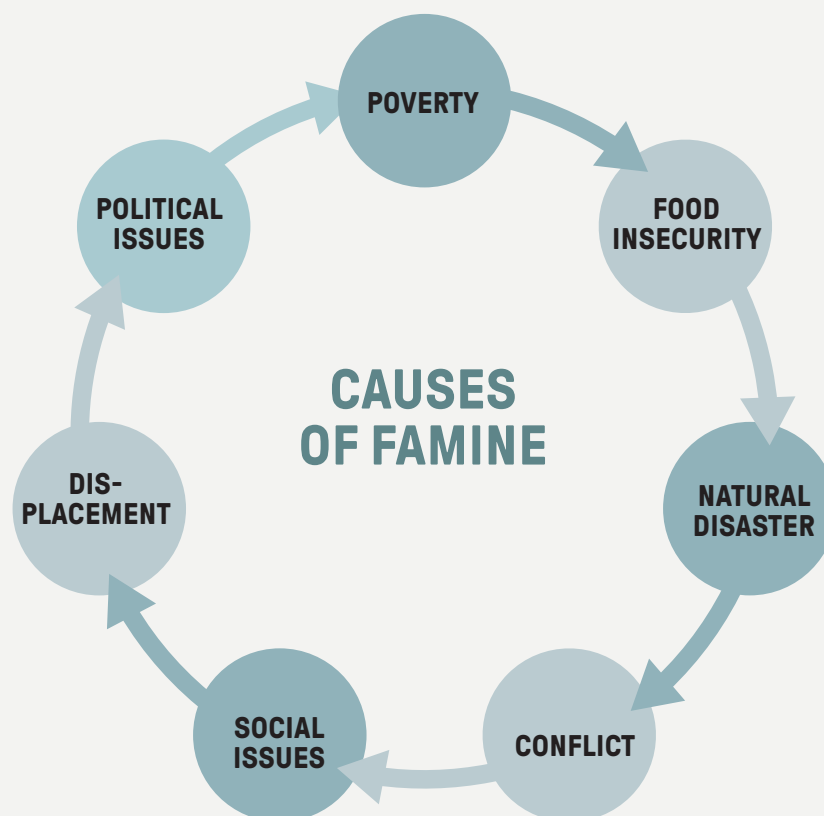
Famine is a situation in which a substantial proportion of the population of a country or region are unable to access adequate food, resulting in widespread acute malnutrition and loss of life by starvation and disease.

UN Refugee Agency



In the past, famines have stemmed from a combination of factors, such as conflict, displacement, chronic poverty, food insecurity, natural disasters, or other political and social issues.

Wars and conflict are usually the primary drivers of famine as they lead to forced displacement, disrupt people's traditional ways of accessing food and income, hinder humanitarian access, and push economies into a long-term decline. Natural disasters - such as droughts, flooding and cyclones - and the effects of climate change can also lead to famine, endangering agriculture and livestock activities in regions where the majority of the population live off the land.



SOME OF THE UNDERLYING FACTORS WHICH CAN LEAD TO FAMINE

NATURAL



Buried machinery in barn lot in Dallas, South Dakota, United States during the Dust Bowl - Image Credit 1

Climate and Weather

One of the most significant natural factors contributing to famines are adverse climate conditions. Prolonged periods of drought, extreme heat, or unseasonable rainfall can lead to crop failures and reduced agricultural yields. For example, the Dust Bowl in the United States during the 1930s resulted from a combination of drought and poor land management practices.

Crop disease has also been a significant causal factor in famine - including the Great Irish Famine of 1845-52. Pesticides have made crop disease preventable in the modern era, but access to them requires resources that may not always be available to those without money or influence.



Blighted Potato - Image Credit 2

DISCUSSION POINT

To what extent do you feel that famines are manmade?

In 1845 the potato famine in the Netherlands and Flanders was a natural disaster that blighted potato crops and demonstrated the destructive impact that crop failure can have:

On 20 September 1845, The Buck's Gazette published an article on the 'general failure of the potato crop' across Europe, due to a 'parasitical fungus' that like a 'plague spreads itself in every direction'. Countries in which the crops were badly affected, the article states, are 'Belgium, Holland, France', while 'Ireland, which it was hoped would escape, is now it appears, likely to participate in the calamity [...] the potato crisis, combined with failed wheat harvests and very cold winters, led to high food prices and increased poverty among the Dutch population. Between 1845 and 1847, excess mortality was between 22% and 32% [...] Newspapers reported several food riots that broke out in Delft in 1845 (Van der Wiel, 1991) and in other larger Dutch cities in 1847 (Paping and Tassenaar, 2007: 165–167). In Groningen, five people were killed in these skirmishes (Opregte Haarlemsche Courant, 6 July 1847).



Little Dutch boy with pan, on his way to a soup kitchen
- Image Credit 3

Source: Corporaal, M., & Jensen, L. (2024). Famine and 'hongersnood' as transnational memory: Literary legacies of the 1840s food crises in Ireland and the Netherlands. *Memory Studies*, 0(0).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980241283894>



Mount Tambora
- Image Credit 4

Natural disasters, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis can destroy crops, disrupt food distribution, and displace populations. The 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia led to the "Year Without a Summer" in 1816, causing widespread crop failures and famine in Europe and North America.

Market Failures

Economic factors, such as supply and demand imbalances, can trigger famine. When food prices rise beyond the means of the poor, access to food becomes limited. The Great Bengal Famine in 1943 was made worse by market failures and hoarding, caused by Government price controls on rice which made it less profitable for farmers to sell. The price was reduced by the Government to help people afford it, but many farmers were unable to make a living selling at the Government price, so they stockpiled it in the hope of achieving a better price when the price controls were relaxed.



Great Bengal Famine 1943
- Image Credit 5

Resource Allocation

Unequal distribution of resources, such as land and wealth, can lead to food scarcity for marginalised populations. In many historic famines, elites or colonial powers often controlled the majority of fertile land, leaving peasants with poor land that produces poorer quality food.



Calcutta 1943
- Image Credit 6

SOME OF THE UNDERLYING FACTORS WHICH CAN LEAD TO FAMINE

ECONOMIC



SOME OF THE UNDERLYING FACTORS WHICH CAN LEAD TO FAMINE

POLITICAL

Government Policies

Political decisions can significantly contribute to famines. For example, the Soviet Union's policies during the Holodomor in the early 1930s, including forced collectivisation and grain confiscation, played a central role in causing mass starvation as the Government exerted control over access to food.



- Image Credit 7



Starvation was a result of the Nigerian Civil War for many civilians - Image Credit 8

Conflict and War

Wars and armed conflicts disrupt food production, distribution, and access. Civilians often bear the brunt of these disruptions, leading to widespread famine. The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) and the Ethiopian Civil War (1983-1985) both resulted in devastating famines.

Lack of Infrastructure

Insufficient infrastructure, including transportation and storage facilities, can impede the distribution of food during times of crisis. This was a significant factor in the Bengal Famine of 1943.



Great Bengal Famine 1943 - Image Credit 9

Social Inequality

Social structures that perpetuate inequality can leave marginalised groups vulnerable to famine. Caste systems in India, for example, have historically limited the access of lower-caste populations to food and resources.



- Image Credit 10



SOME OF THE UNDERLYING FACTORS WHICH CAN LEAD TO FAMINE

SOCIAL

CAUSAL FACTORS OF FAMINES ACROSS EUROPE

IRELAND (1845-1852)

The famine in Ireland, commonly known as the Irish Potato Famine or the Great Famine (1845-1852), was primarily caused by the devastating spread of a plant disease known as the potato blight (*Phytophthora infestans*). Potatoes were the staple crop for the majority of the Irish population, especially the poor, who relied heavily on them for sustenance.

FINLAND (1866-1868)

The Famine of 1866-1868 was the last famine in Finland, and the last major famine in Northern Europe. In Finland, the famine is known as “the great hunger years”, or suuret nälkävuodet. About 8.5% of the entire population died of hunger; in the hardest-hit areas it was up to 20%. The major cause of the famine was heavy frost from January until June and from September, which destroyed the crops. Government policies, however, restricted relief and did not help to alleviate the overall distress.

UKRAINE (1932-1933)

The Holodomor, a devastating famine that occurred in Ukraine from 1932 to 1933, had complex causes primarily rooted in Soviet policies. Joseph Stalin’s forced collectivisation of agriculture and grain requisitioning campaigns in Ukraine played a central role. The government’s aggressive ways of obtaining grain, combined with harsh penalties for those who resisted, resulted in the confiscation of food from Ukrainian farmers.

THE NETHERLANDS (1944-1945)

The Dutch Famine of 1944-1945, also known as the “Hunger Winter,” was primarily caused by the disruption of food distribution during World War II. The German occupation of the Netherlands led to a severe food shortage as supplies dwindled and transportation networks broke down. The Allies’ strategic bombing campaigns further hindered access to food, particularly in the west of the country.

GERMANY (1914-1924)

Famine in Germany during and after World War I was marked by a combination of economic difficulties and wartime conditions. During World War I, the blockade of Germany by the British Royal Navy severely restricted imports of food and fertiliser, resulting in food shortages of up to 30%, and this was compounded by the diversion of some agricultural production to the War Economy - with workers required to create munitions, uniforms and equipment instead of growing food.



OPTIONAL LEARNING TASKS



DIGITAL ACTIVITIES



CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES



DIGITAL INFOGRAPHIC CREATION

Students use online tools like Canva or Piktochart to create infographics explaining the causes and impacts of a specific historical famine. They should include statistics, images, and brief explanations of the famine's context.



ROLE-PLAY DEBATE SIMULATION

Students are assigned roles representing different stakeholders in a famine scenario (e.g., farmers, government officials, aid workers, economists). They debate potential solutions and policies to address the famine, considering various perspectives and interests.



CAUSE-AND-EFFECT CHAIN

In small groups, students create large paper-based cause-and-effect chains for a specific famine. They use sticky notes to show how different factors (natural, economic, political, social) interconnect and lead to famine conditions.



FAMINE PREVENTION POSTER CAMPAIGN

Students design and create posters that highlight strategies for preventing famines. They should focus on addressing the underlying causes discussed in the lesson, such as improving infrastructure, promoting sustainable agriculture, or developing early warning systems.



Image Credits

Image Credit 1

Sloan, 1936
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Dust_Bowl#/media/File:Dust_Bowl_-_Dallas,_South_Dakota_1936.jpg

Image Credit 2

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highland_Potato_Famine#/media/File:Phytophthora_infestans-effects.jpg

Image Credit 3

Emmy Andriesse Amsterdam, early 1945
<https://www.leidenspecialcollectionsblog.nl/articles/emmy-andriesse-forbidden-photographs-of-the-hunger-winter-and-liberation-of-holland-1944-1945#PK%20F%20A%2003768>

Image Credit 4

Jialian Gao, 2011
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Mount_Tambora?uselang=ro#/media/File:Caldera_Mt_Tambora_Sumbawa_Indonesia.jpg

Image Credit 5

Unknown, 1940's
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bengal_famine_image.jpg

Image Credit 6

Calcutta 1946 BBC History
https://ichef.bbci.co.uk/ace/standard/976/cpsprodpb/3986/production/_132662741_begging.jpg

Image Credit 7

Ron Burton 1968
<https://histoire.ci/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/20011515436-04-biafra-nigeria-civil-war-super-169.jpg>

Image Credit 8

Lyle Conrad, 1960's
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Starving-woman-africa-biafra-nigeria-conflict-famine.jpg>

Image Credit 9

Unknown, 1943
https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/Bengal_famine_of_1943

Image Credit 10

Bengal Famine 1943
<https://s3.youthkiawaaz.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/06093157/bengalfamine-640x400.jpg>

Credits

This learning resource was co-developed by the Heritages of Hunger research consortium and Nerve Centre Derry

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Some of the text has been adapted from the Heritages of Hunger virtual exhibition, <https://heritagesofhunger.org>, courtesy of Charley Boerman (University of Amsterdam) and Niels Arnbak. The visual styling of this learning programme has partly been inspired by the concept, design, and realisation of the exhibition, courtesy of HOAX Amsterdam.

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 Matleena Billington (Kuopio Cultural History Museum)
 Anne-Lise Bobeldijk (NIOD)
 Charley Boerman (University of Amsterdam)
 Marieke van Egeraat (Radboud University)
 Laurence Gourievidis (Université Clermont Auvergne)
 Violetta Hionidou (Newcastle University)
 Lindsay Janssen (Radboud University)
 William Jenkins (York University)
 Lotte Jensen (Radboud University)
 Jason King (Irish Heritage Trust)
 Anne Lahtinen (The Finnish Labour Museum Werstas)
 Deborah Madden (Lancaster University)
 Jeremy Maron (Canadian Museum for Human Rights)
 Emily Mark-FitzGerald (University College Dublin)
 Mark McGowan (University of Toronto)
 Anne van Mourik (NIOD)
 Andrew G. Newby (University of Jyväskylä)
 Gloria Román Ruiz (University of Granada)
 Clara Vlessing (Radboud University)
 Ingrid de Zwart (Wageningen University and Research)

And the following organisations:

Canada Ireland Foundation
 Centro Documental de la Memoria Historica
 EuroClio
 The Finnish Labour Museum Werstas
 Holodomor Research and Education Consortium (HREC)
 HOAX
 Irish Heritage Trust
 Kuopio Cultural History Museum
 Museum Rotterdam
 NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies
 Radboud Pre-University College of Society
 Radboud University
 Red Star Line Museum
 Versetzmuseum
 Wageningen University and Research

Funding

Heritages of Hunger: Societal Reflections on Past European Famines in Education, Commemoration and Musealisation is a collaboration between Radboud University, NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, and Wageningen University and Research. It is funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) under grant agreement no. NWA.1160.18.197.

