



MODULE THREE: FOOD & NUTRITION



LESSON ONE: MARKET CONDITIONS AND EMERGENCY FOOD



LESSON DESCRIPTION

This lesson will detail how market conditions in a society have an impact on the development of famine. It will also highlight the types and prices of staple foods available before and during a hunger crisis, assessing the impact of famine on a person's livelihood. The lesson will incorporate case studies and discussion of the following famines:

- » **The Spanish Hunger Years (1939-52)**
- » **The Dutch Food Riots (1847)**
- » **The Finnish Great Hunger Years (1866-68)**



LESSON INTENTIONS

- ✓ Understand that famine can impact differently on different people and communities in the same country or region.
- ✓ Identify reasons why some communities may be more affected than others.



LESSON OUTCOMES

- ✓ Describe the significance of how societies facing famines adapted to new food conditions.
- ✓ Be able to explain the types of foods and food alternatives eaten during famines.



USEFUL ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION

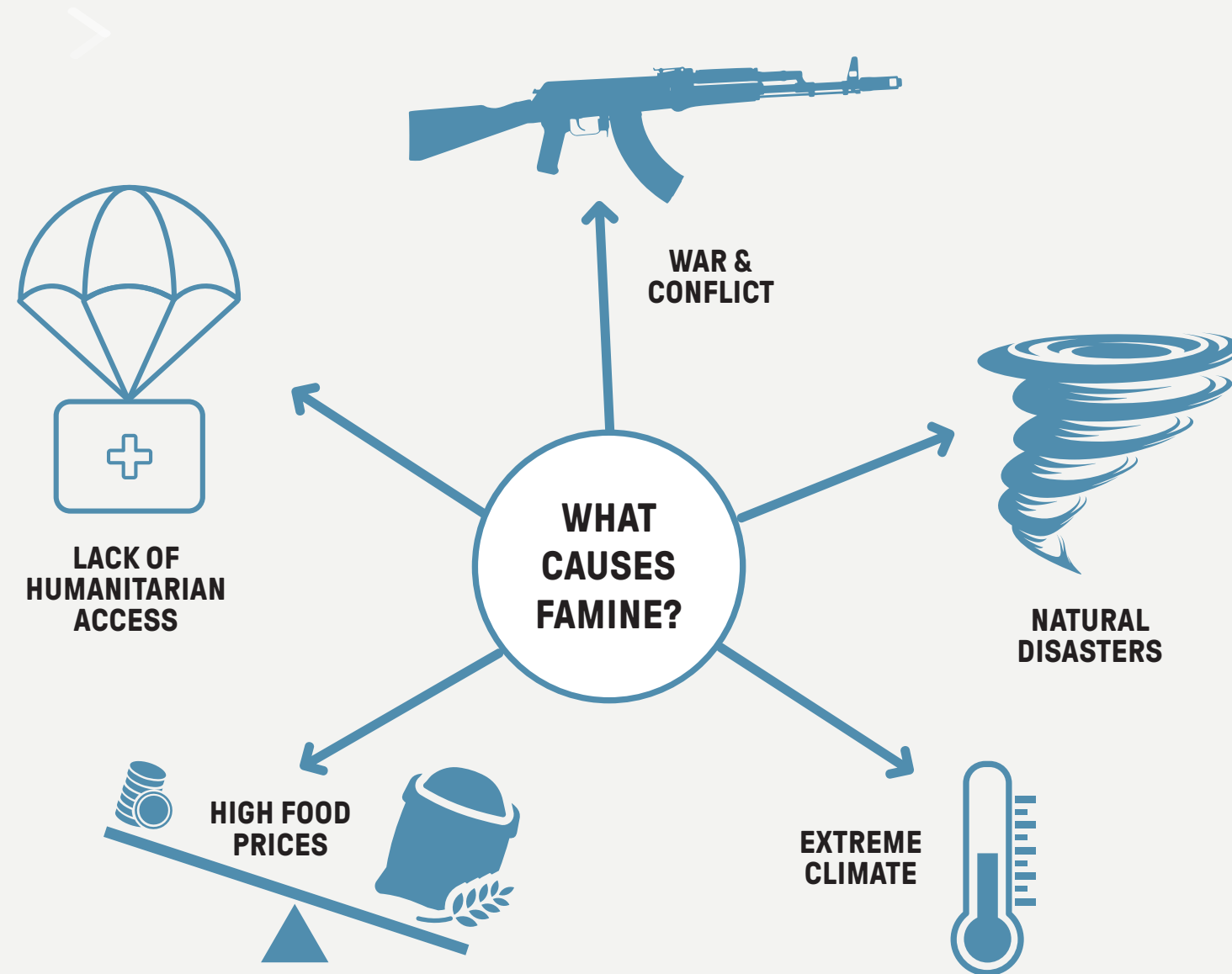
- > [Global Famine Case Studies](#)
- > [Online Heritages of Hunger Repository](#)
- > [Online Heritages of Hunger Exhibition](#)

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

- > [Greek famine recipes \(in Greek so mostly of interest to Greek teachers/ students\)](#)
- > [A food riot during the Irish famine of 1740-41](#)
- > [Ad encouraging Germans to collect acorns and chestnuts](#)
- > [A satirical approach to food scarcity in WW 1 Germany](#)

INTRODUCTION

The causes of famine can be many and varied. Natural disasters, climate, war, political regimes and mismanagement of resources have all been causal factors in famines across history and geography. However, these can be made worse by other issues which can have significant impacts on those most directly affected by the shortage of food.



MARKET CONDITIONS

Module One shows us that famine is very often not simply the shortage of food. But it is the political response to that shortage that can determine whether a famine develops and the severity and duration of that famine.

Market conditions are often a key element of that political response. Market conditions can refer to the ability of food to reach people as determined by access to the market; the availability of food; and the demand for food. Access and availability can be politically influenced, which in turn fuels demand. If food is not easily able to reach people, and its availability is reduced, then demand will increase. In this way market conditions can be critical.





CASE STUDY

THE SPANISH HUNGER YEARS (1939-52)



Photograph of a
bakery in post-
war Spain
- Image Credit 1

The Spanish Hunger Years saw an estimated 200,000 people die from starvation and malnutrition-related illness as the Second War, and then its legacy, gripped Europe.

The famine is now acknowledged to be the result of Spanish Leader General Franco's economic protectionist policies, known as Autarky. Through these policies Franco sought to create economic self-sufficiency for Spain, so that it would not be reliant on either imports or exports for its health, wealth and prosperity.

As a result, agriculture stagnated, as prices and wages fell dramatically, with a national economic crisis made worse by the effects of the war both in Spain and across Europe. The impact was catastrophic for many Spanish people. Compounded by a denial from the State that its policies were to blame, the effects of the famine were minimised in public discourse and underreported by both the Franco-controlled press and the medical establishment.

The Market conditions that the famine helped to create were then followed by a thriving 'black market' in food supplies within Spain, ensuring that the poorest and most vulnerable were disproportionately affected, and allowing those with resources or political connections to access food despite the famine.

DISCUSSION POINT

Can you think of any examples of how market conditions affect your access to food today, even when famine is not an issue?



HUNGER & DESPERATION

When people feel threatened by hunger, they can resort to desperate actions to secure food for themselves and their families.



'One young girl wrote that her father was so hungry he ate their dog. And it wasn't just animals. Approximately 1,500 Leningraders were arrested for cannibalism during this time.'

Alexis Peri writing on the Siege of Leningrad (Boston University, 2017)



CASE STUDY

THE DUTCH FOOD RIOTS OF 1847



British Soldiers
bringing food
relief to Dutch
children
- Image Credit 2

In the mid-nineteenth century, much of Holland was impacted by a potato blight that plunged the country into a food crisis that saw the prices of basic foodstuffs triple – a situation that was even more severe for those small farmers who depended on the sale of surplus potatoes for their income.

With widespread discontent at the prices, and real fear for future access to food, public disorder and rioting broke out in several Dutch towns and cities. In Harlingen Port a ship being loaded with new potatoes for export sparked riots and in the city of Groningen the 'Bread Revolt' of June 1847 saw four civilians killed and thirteen wounded by soldiers, as the Government struggled to bring the situation under control.



As well as resorting to violence, the desperation brought on by famine can force people to make very difficult decisions about what to eat.

Humans can be very resilient and creative in finding sources of nutrition at times of famine and hunger, and history has shown us many ways in which people have tried to survive by eating a range of different unusual foods.

BARK BREAD

Bark bread was a common alternative during periods of food scarcity and famine in Finland, as well as in Sweden and Norway. It involved scraping bark from trees, drying it, and grinding it into a flour-like substance.

- Image Credit 3



Above: Grating sugar beets
- Image Credit 4

TULIP BULBS & SUGAR BEETS



Tulip bulbs for eating
- Image Credit 5

During the Hungerwinter in the Netherlands, severe food shortages led people to use unconventional food sources like tulip bulbs and sugar beets. The Dutch Nutrition Council distributed information and recipes on how to use these items for food.

EATING UNUSUAL ANIMALS AND CANNIBALISM



Rats for eating
- Image Credit 6

During severe and prolonged famines, desperate people turn to eating pets or animals not usually consumed as a last resort for survival. In extreme cases, instances of cannibalism have been documented. These acts, while uncommon and often culturally taboo, highlight the severe consequences of famine and the extreme measures that people can take when starving.

“

'I was seven years old, and I remember everything as if it were not long ago, in the village of Petrivka where I was born and grew up. There was a terrible famine in 1933; there were 520 households, and half of the village died from hunger. There were incidents of cannibalism. Parents died from hunger, and two brothers and a five-year old sister remained; they stabbed her to death and ate her. A mother and daughter ate her six year old brother & son. They were taken to the police and their fate is unknown...

*Letter written by Khurdei Oleksii (Aleksei) in 1989.
Part of the Maniak collection. Hosted by HREC.*



CONCLUSION

Throughout history, and right up to the present day, famines have had different impacts on different groups in society. Those that have the greatest access to power and resources are less likely to be seriously affected than those that do not.

On a more individual level, famine often impacts differently, with children, women, the elderly and the disabled at greatest risk of being most severely affected by famine.



OPTIONAL LEARNING TASKS

DIGITAL
ACTIVITIESCLASSROOM
ACTIVITIES

PRESENTATION

Create a multimedia presentation identifying the market conditions that contributed to a real-life famine.



ROLE-PLAY

Divide the class into groups representing different stakeholders (farmers, merchants, consumers, government officials) and have them act out scenarios related to changing food prices and availability.

FAMINE FOOD
RECIPE BOOK

Have students research and compile a physical recipe book of foods that people have resorted to eating during famines throughout history.



Image Credits

Image Credit 1

Editex (2016, bach., p. 352)
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00309230.2022.2039241#d1e574>

Image Credit 2

Midgley, 1944
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=24499155>

Image Credit 3

Bark Bread, 2024
https://heritagesofhunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/3_bark-bread-photograph-colour.jpeg

Image Credit 4

Johannes van Rhijn, 1945
https://hunger.rich.ru.nl/detail_image_view/96

Image Credit 5

UMN 2016
<https://extension.umn.edu/how/planting-bulbs-tubers-and-rhizomes>

Image Credit 6

DBCLS 2021
https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:202101_Rat.svg



LESSON TWO: WOMEN & FAMINE

LESSON DESCRIPTION

This lesson will explore the role of women in famine history and their active role in the provision of relief and supplying food, as well as the ways in which they are portrayed as victims. It will look at case studies of the role of women in different societies and issues of agency, displacement and emigration. The lesson will incorporate case studies and discussion of the following famine:

» The Great Irish Famine (1845-1852)



LESSON INTENTIONS

- ✓ Identify the different roles played by women during famine.
- ✓ Understand the reasons why women may have been disproportionately affected by the effects of famine.



LESSON OUTCOMES

- ✓ Be aware of women's agency in supplying food and relief.



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:

- > [Poem from Flanders criticising the rich who are unwilling to provide relief](#)
- > [Dutch monument of female courier, there are stories of women playing an important role as courier during the Dutch Hunger winter](#)
- > [Ad discouraging women from using the black market in the Spanish famine](#)
- > [Newspaper article about a women's protest in the Netherlands during the Hunger Winter](#)
- > [Image of a mother with starving children from Ukraine](#)



INTRODUCTION

Famines generally have a more severe impact on the **less powerful** and **more vulnerable groups** in society. This is not just limited to social class, geography and income – **gender** can often be a significant factor in the impact of famine.

> WOMEN & FAMINE

Famine tends to impact women disproportionately more than men due to a range of social, economic, and biological factors.

Culturally, women in many societies have been expected to eat last and least within the family structure, prioritizing the nutrition of men and children. This practice becomes especially detrimental during famines, leading to higher rates of malnutrition among women. Additionally, pregnant and nursing women have increased nutritional needs, making them more vulnerable to the effects of food shortages.



*The widow Connor and her dying child
(Great Irish Famine) - Image Credit 1*



*Two emaciated children
and their mother (the
Hungerwinter)
- Image Credit 2*

Economically, women still frequently have less access to resources, land ownership, and decision-making power. This limits their ability to secure food for themselves and their dependents during crises.

> EXPLOITATION



*A starving mother
and her children
(the Hungerwinter)
- Image Credit 3*

During food shortages, women may be forced to resort to measures such as selling sex or entering into early marriage to secure food, exposing them to additional health risks and exploitation. The increased workload of searching for food and water can also take a toll on women's health and well-being.

To compound this, women's lower social status in many societies may result in less access to emergency food aid and resources. Gender-based violence has been seen to increase during times of scarcity, further compromising women's safety and health.



*Mother of the occupation,
Greece. Costas Valsamis
Credit: Heritages of Hunger
Repository - Image Credit 4*

NUTRITIONAL INEQUALITY



A woman feeds her child in Yemen
- Image Credit 5

Women may also suffer because of the notion that children and men who are engaged in manual work have a greater need for nutrition and energy, which can see women coming last in the distribution of food.

Within many cultures it has often been regarded as a natural maternal act to sacrifice your own health and nutrition for your children, and this depiction of the selfless mother has been recurrent in famine throughout history.

In a similar vein, portrayals of famines have regularly focused on women and children as particular victims of famine, reinforcing a stereotype of female powerlessness and presenting them as needing to be saved by others.

DISCUSSION POINT

Why do you think that women may be more severely impacted by famine than men?



- Image Credit 6

CASE STUDY

WOMEN & THE IRISH FAMINE

The generally accepted narrative of women in the Irish Famine was, until relatively recently, that of victimhood, and much iconography of the Famine depicts women in this role, such as the illustration of Bridget O'Donnell and her children which was published in the Illustrated London News on 15 December 1849.

This engraving, made by Cork-born artist James Mahoney, is one of the most recognised images of the Great Irish Famine. Less well known, but even more moving, was the article that appeared alongside the image, which provided an interview with Bridget.

At the onset of the Famine, she and her husband rented over seven acres of land in County Clare, but they fell behind with the rent. They were evicted two months before Bridget gave birth—to a still-born child. Shortly afterwards, her thirteen-year-old son died, 'with want and with hunger'. It is not known what subsequently became of the O'Donnell family.

Bridget, like hundreds of thousands of other Irish women, became invisible, yet her story and her image had appeared in one of the most widely-circulated newspapers of the day.

More recent research has revealed that women had more agency than may have been thought. There are many instances of women being active in petitioning local landlords for food, rent relief and other assistance.

Various Ladies Associations and groups were established across the country amongst those that did have access to food and resources to provide help and famine relief wherever they were able to do so. In Cork a government official praised the work of one such group:

'There is a ladies' association, doing much good, at a great personal sacrifice and upon a very limited fund. These ladies visit the cabins where the worst cases of fever and sickness prevail, and by a judicious distribution of nourishment and clothing, have doubtless, under Providence, been instrumental in saving many lives.'

<https://www.rte.ie/history/famine-ireland/2020/0831/1162378-hidden-heroes-women-and-the-great-famine/>

It is clear that the role of women in famine is more complicated than the simple mother and victim narratives that have been commonly seen over time, but it is equally clear that women have not experienced famine in the same way as men, and this has been a repeated feature of famine across time and space.



OPTIONAL LEARNING TASKS



DIGITAL ACTIVITIES



CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES



DIGITAL TIMELINE CREATION

Have students create an interactive timeline using a tool like TimelineJS, highlighting the roles and experiences of women during various famines throughout history.



SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN SIMULATION

Have students create a mock social media campaign raising awareness about the disproportionate impact of famine on women, using a platform like Canva to design their posts.



HISTORICAL LETTER WRITING

Have students write letters from the perspective of fictional or historical women during different famines, describing their experiences and challenges.



DEBATE ON GENDER ROLES

Organize a classroom debate on why women might be more severely impacted by famine than men, encouraging students to consider various social, economic, and biological factors.



FAMINE RELIEF ORGANIZATION SIMULATION

Divide the class into groups and have them create and present plans for famine relief organizations that specifically address the needs of women during food crises.



Image Credits

Image Credit 1

Unknown, 1850

https://hunger.rich.ru.nl/detail_image_view/54

Image Credit 2

Menno Huizinga, 1945

https://hunger.rich.ru.nl/detail_image_view/62

Image Credit 3

Menno Huizinga, 1945

https://hunger.rich.ru.nl/detail_image_view/81

Image Credit 4

Costas Valsemis, 1979

https://hunger.rich.ru.nl/detail_memorialsite_view/36

Image Credit 5

Gender Concern International

<https://www.genderconcerns.org/news/famine-in-wartorn-Yemen-has-calamitous-effects-on-women-and-girls/>

Image Credit 6

Illustrated London News, 1849

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Irish_potato_famine_Bridget_O%27Donnel.jpg

Credits

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

Project leads

Margu rite Corporaal (Radboud University)
Chris Cusack (Radboud University)
Niall Kerr (Nerve)
John Peto (Nerve)

Co-developers

Giulia Bruna (University of Macerata)
Eliza Spakman (Radboud University)

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With assistance from:

Miguel  ngel del Arco Blanco (University of Granada)
Matleena Billington (Kuopio Cultural History Museum)
Anne-Lise Bobeldijk (NIOD)
Charley Boerman (University of Amsterdam)
Marieke van Egeraat (Radboud University)
Laurence Gourievidis (Universit  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)
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Mark McGowan (University of Toronto)
Anne van Mourik (NIOD)
Andrew G. Newby (University of Jyv skyl )
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