The Irish Potato Famine, 1845-1849

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Fakulta humanitních studií
Ústav moderních jazyků a literatur

Akademický rok: 2019/2020

ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE
(projektu, uměleckého díla, uměleckého výkonu)

Jméno a příjmení: **Eva Škraňková**
Osobní číslo: **H160529**
Studijní program: **B7310 Filologie**
Studijní obor: **Anglický jazyk pro manažerskou praxi**
Forma studia: **Prezenční**
Téma práce: **Velký hladomor v Irsku v letech 1845-1849**

Zásady pro vypracování

Shromáždění materiálu k tématu
Studium odborné literatury v oblasti dějin Irska vztahující se k Velkého hladomoru
Formulace cílů práce
Analýza událostí Velkého hladomoru v Irsku v polovině 19. století
Vyvození a formulace závěrů práce

Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **Tištěná/elektronická**
Jazyk zpracování: **Angličtina**

Seznam doporučené literatury:

Cathal, Póirtéir, ed. *The Great Irish Famine*. Cork: Mercier Press, 1995.
Egan, Timothy. *The Immortal Irishman: The Irish Revolutionary Who Became an American Hero*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.
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Ó Gráda, Cormac. *The Great Irish Famine: Studies in Economic and Social History*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989.

Vedoucí bakalářské práce: **Gregory Jason Bell, B.A., M.B.A., M.A., Ph.D.**
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Datum zadání bakalářské práce: **8. listopadu 2019**
Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce: **11. května 2020**

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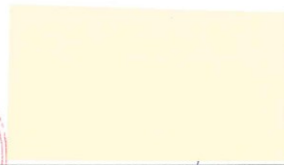
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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá historickou katastrofou zvanou Velký hladomor v Irsku v letech 1845-1849. První část této práce se zaměřuje na významné historické události, které formovaly nadvládu Británie nad Irskem po staletí a na vyplývající důsledky pro Irské obyvatelstvo. Druhá část popisuje pět let přetrvávajícího hladomoru a podniknuté kroky, které měly tuto pohromu zmírnit. V neposlední řadě práce zkoumá několik podstatných aspektů vedoucích k hladomoru a argumentuje, že i přestože se hladomoru dalo předejít, počínání Britů by nemělo být považováno za genocidu Irů.

Klíčová slova: irský hladomor, plíseň, politika volného trhu, útlak, Irsko, Británie, Irové, Britové, brambory, plodina, genocida, podrobení, vlastníci půdy, ideologie, katolíci, protestanti, vláda, rasismus

ABSTRACT

This bachelor's thesis deals with a historical catastrophe, the Irish potato famine, 1845-1849. First, it studies significant events in Irish history that resulted in the gradual, centuries-long domination of Britain over Ireland, and it examines some of the consequences of this domination for the Irish. Secondly, it details the five-year-long potato famine and steps taken in order to mitigate it. Ultimately, this thesis lists several factors resulting in the famine, concluding that even though it could have been avoided, it still does not qualify as a British genocide against the Irish.

Keywords: potato famine, blight, laissez-faire, oppression, Ireland, Britain, Irish, British, potatoes, crop, genocide, subjugation, landowners, ideology, Catholic, Protestant, government, racism

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

On June 1, 1997, at County Cork's sesquicentennial festival commemorating the Irish Potato Famine, British Prime Minister Tony Blair publicly acknowledged the British government's culpability, stating that "those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive human tragedy." With this statement, Blair officially confirmed the widely-held Irish opinion that the calamity that befell them between 1845 and 1849 was not entirely natural.[1] True, Ireland's potato crop was unexpectedly attacked by the fungus *phytophthora infestans*, manifesting in a blight that led to several years of famine, resulting in at least a million deaths and necessitating the emigration of over one million more. However, by 1845 when the blight first appeared, the Irish were already heavily impoverished and solely reliant on the potato crop, as a consequence of centuries of British oppression and subjugation. And when the blight did hit, the laissez-faire policies of British politicians provided insufficient assistance. Instead of mitigating the famine, the British used it as an excuse to rebuild the Irish nation. Evictions and emigration were the products of the British eagerness to modernize a largely agrarian society via industrialization. Widespread death was the result of the British idea to civilize the Irish, whom they Anglocentrically deemed undisciplined and lazy.[2] This thesis analyses the political, economic, religious, and racial factors then at play, as well as the prevailing attitudes towards charity, point by point making it clear that the famine could have been avoided. It argues that the government's relief schemes and policies were subject to misguided laissez-faire economic and political theories, which left the Irish helpless. Moreover, the British were not only prejudicial against the Irish for being Catholic but viewed them as a lower race, both of which assured the British of the rightness of their heavy-handed approach towards the starving Irish. Although private donations did ease some of the suffering, the majority British opinion was that the Irish, for various reasons, deserved what was happening to them, which in turn resulted in a general lack of mercy. For this reason, although the British may not have been guilty of genocide toward the Irish, they were certainly guilty of a malignant neglect.

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[1] Kenneth L. Campbell, *Ireland's History: Prehistory to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 214.

[2] Cathal Póirtéir, ed., introduction to *The Great Irish Famine* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1995), 9–10.

1 BACKGROUND, 1100-1845

Britain made countless attempts to conquer and rule Ireland. The first chapter focuses on the English historical oppression of the Irish nation. Those eight centuries contained a great number of wars, conquests, revolts and persecutions. Although the English failed to subjugate the Irish country completely, the following events help to depict the uneven relationship between the two nations.

1.1 Anglo-Norman Invasion

The oppression of the Irish by the British dates back to the twelfth century. The first attempt to bring Irish Catholics under the rule of England came in 1155, when English pope Adrian IV wrote a letter (the Bull *Laudabiliter*) authorizing King Henry II to capture Ireland. The aim was to spread the Catholic religion among the Celtic pagans, or as the pope put it "enlarge the bounds of the church, to declare the truth of the Christian faith to ignorant and barbarous nations."[3]

The Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland occurred in 1169, and within six years, Henry II became the Lord of Ireland, marking the first trace of English domination. Places such as Munster, Leinster, Waterford, Wexford, and Connaught were brought under English control while Dublin became an English administration center and the residence of representatives of the King of England.[4] Henry II himself appeared in Waterford in 1171 and subjugated Irish provincial kings without significant resistance.[5] The subsequent Treaty of Windsor of 1175 permitted the Irish high-king to hold the unconquered territories, as long as he remained loyal to Henry II. However, the treaty was broken, and the last high-king of Ireland Rory O´Connor was forced to resign in 1193.[6] King Henry II's youngest son, King John, was crowned in 1199 and named Lord of Ireland, a title which would remain part of the English monarch's title until 1541.[7]

1.2 Assimilation of Anglo-Normans with Irish

Over time, Anglo-Norman invaders united with local Irish, set up families and adopted Irish culture, customs and language. For this reason, their posterity began to be known under

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[3] Catherine Hines, "Reaping the Turmoil Within: How Ireland's Kings Triggered the Anglo-Norman Invasion," *Tenor of Our Times* 2, no. 5 (2013): 22–23, https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol2/iss1/5.
[4] Aidan Doyle, *A History of the Irish Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 14.
[5] David Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery: Britain, 1066–1284* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 218.
[6] Hines, "Reaping the Turmoil Within," 26.
[7] Ann Lyon, *Constitutional History of the UK* (London: Cavendish Publishing, 2003), 37.

the term *Hibernicis ipis Hiberniores* – "more Irish than the Irish."[8] During the fourteenth century, such alliances began to be viewed as unlawful and a potential advantage for England's enemies. As a result, laws were confirmed by the Parliament, known as the Statues of Kilkenny, which disallowed Normans' "Irish dress, Irish hairstyle, Irish sport" in order to separate Irish from Normans. Furthermore, Normans were prohibited from using Gaelic language or naming their offspring with Irish names. Even though the applied measures covered a wide range of restrictions, they had little ability to preclude Irish customs.[9]

1.3 Richard II's Expeditions

The unrest caused by "Irish rebels" (words used by Richard II himself) endangered the King's lieges and had to be restrained by Richard II at the end of the fourteenth century. The English king undertook two military expeditions against the Irish of Leinster, with the goal of expelling them.[10] The first expedition, in 1394, consisted of the largest army yet to appear on Irish lands. This expedition resulted in the defeat of the Irish King of Leinster, who yielded to Richard's superior force.[11] However, his second expedition in 1399, during which a far weaker English army met a well-prepared Irish force, resulted in Richard's retreat from Ireland.[12]

1.4 The Pale

During the late-medieval period, a physical boundary known as Pale was demarcated, defining the Anglo-Norman kingdom in Ireland, stretching from the north to the south along the east coast, with a centre in Dublin. Outside of this area, the Irish lived peacefully and according to their laws, and they were considered rebellious and not amenable to control – therefore, the designation "beyond the pale." Such a border, basically a fortified ditch, marked the extent of the conquered territory, which was small in comparison with the rest of independent Ireland. By the end of the fifteenth century, the Pale diminished to a minimum, merely around Dublin and a few adjacent towns.[13]

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[8] Timothy Egan, *The Immortal Irishman: The Irish Revolutionary Who Became an American Hero* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 8.

[9] Carol Daugherty Rasnic, *Northern Ireland: Can Sean and John Live in Peace?; An American Legal Perspective* (Richmond: Brandylane Publishers, 2003), 5.

[10] James Francis Lydon, "Richard II's Expeditions to Ireland," *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 93, no. 2 (1963): 136, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25509522.

[11] Ibid., 138.

[12] Dorothy Johnston, "Richard II and the Submissions of Gaelic Ireland," *Irish Historical Studies* 22, no. 85 (1980): 5, https://www.jstor.org/stable/30006710.

[13] Egan, *The Immortal Irishman*, 7.

1.5 The Tudor dynasty and its influence on Ireland

1.5.1 Henry VII and Poynings' Law

As the Pale proved to be only a small victory over the Irish, the first English monarch of the Tudor dynasty, Henry VII, commissioned Sir Edward Poynings to make the rest of Ireland dependent on the Crown by summoning parliament at Drogheda and establishing Poynings' law in 1495.[14] For almost three centuries afterward, until Irish independence in 1782, the Irish parliament was under the control of England. Unless the English King's consent was given, no session of Irish parliament could be held and no laws could be passed. To a large extent, this law considerably limited the authority of the Irish parliament.[15]

1.5.2 Henry VIII – Establishment of the Anglican Church

Henry VIII, the second Tudor ruler, entered Irish history via his disputes with the Roman Catholic Church. The schism was induced by Henry VIII's urge to sire a male heir to the throne. Enchanted by his wife's lady-in-waiting, Anne Boleyn, Henry demanded a divorce, which Pope Clement VII denied. In response, Henry assigned the role of Archbishop of Canterbury to Thomas Cranmer, who declared Henry's marriage with Catherine of Aragon invalid. Thus, he could officially validate his marriage bond with Anne.[16] As a result of feeling oppressed by the pope and Rome, Henry declared himself "Supreme Head of the Church of England" in 1534, an approach known as the reformation.[17] This Act of Supremacy established the Anglican church in Ireland. After a vote by the Irish parliament in 1541, Henry and his heir were proclaimed, "the only supreme heads of the Church of the whole Ireland."[18] Since this time, ecclesiastical supremacy has belonged to the king, not to the pope. In addition, the act of Surrender and Regrant came into force, declaring the right of the English king to possess the whole of Ireland. The seized lands were then occupied by a new gentry, which faithfully served the king.[19] Although the Irish were strongly persuaded to convert to Protestantism, most remained loyal Catholics. The Irish thus posed a threat to

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[14] John O'Beirne Ranelagh, *A Short History of Ireland*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 52.

[15] Patrick Joseph Lennox, "The Historical Aspect of Home Rule," *North American Review* 195, no. 679 (1912): 793, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25119775.

[16] John Guy, "The Tudor Age," in *The Oxford History of Britain*, ed. Kenneth O. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 273–76.

[17] Ranelagh, *A Short History of Ireland,* 47.

[18] Brendan Bredshaw, *The Irish Constitutional Revolution of the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 158.

[19] Ranelagh, *A Short History of Ireland,* 56.

the English, as their Catholic religion aligned them with the French, who were enemies of England.[20]

1.5.3   The Dissolution of the Monasteries

Henry VIII enacted a dissolution of monasteries in England, Ireland, and Wales, which not only ensured him wealth but denied the Catholic church a base for activities. By law, England could confiscate any monastery or church earning annually as little as 200 pounds or more.[21] Especially in the Pale, the dissolution was warmly welcomed by English overlords who profited from monastic forfeited assets.[22] Because monasteries possessed a considerable amount of land, it was in Henry's interest to seize them. Subsequently, those monasteries, abbeys, and churches found to be in "disorder" were seized and liquidated, an act that undermined those who doubted Henry "being the Head of the Anglican Church."[23] In terms of Ireland, the king's fundamental purpose was to subjugate the Pale as well as bring areas out of this territory under his dominion. During the reign of Henry VIII, approximately half of the Irish monasteries were impounded.[24]

1.5.4   Plantation of Ireland

The English interest in Ireland did not diminish with Henry VIII's successors. Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth I proceeded with the confiscations of lands and assigning them to English ownership.[25] The plantation was one of the Tudor's tactics to occupy Ireland by confiscating land that belonged to the Irish and expelling them from their homes. The goal of the Tudors was clear – "subduing Ireland by replacing disloyal Irishmen with loyal English colonists."[26]

1.6 Seventeenth Century - Oliver Cromwell and the Penal Laws

As a reaction to the uprising of the oppressed Irish Catholics who rebelled and violently killed Protestants in 1641, Oliver Cromwell surrounded Drogheda with armed forces and

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[20] Steve Arman, Simon Bird, and Malcom Wilkinson, *Reformation and Rebellion 1485–1750* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational, 2002), 131.
[21] Schoolhistory, "Dissolution of Monasteries," accessed February 28, 2020, https://schoolhistory.co.uk/notes/dissolution-of-monasteries/.
[22] Brian Igoe, *The Story of Ireland* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu, 2009), 58.
[23] Marek Smoluk, "The Dissolution of the Monasteries and Its Impact on Education in Tudor Times," *Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal* 14, no. 1 (2012): 111, doi:10.2478/v10223-012-0057-x.
[24] Peter Cunich, "The Dissolutions and Their Aftermath," in *A Companion to Tudor Britain*, ed. Robert Tittler, and Norman Leslie Jones (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 223, 229.
[25] Joanne Mattern, *Ireland: Countries and Cultures* (Mankato, MN: Bridgestone Books, 2003), 24.
[26] Ranelagh, *A Short History of Ireland,* 57.

massacred around 4,000 Irish in 1649. Not many reportedly survived, and those who did were enslaved and sent to the West Indies. A massive land confiscation, eviction and deportation followed. [27]

Furthermore, in 1695, provisions of the Irish Penal Laws strengthened the supremacy of English Protestants and deprived Catholics of their religion as well as land. The Penal Laws brought significant restrictions and prohibitions on Gaelic language, Catholic education, and the preaching of Catholicism, as these were understood as a resistance to British authority. Regarding the land rights, unless the oldest son converted to Protestantism, he was not entitled to inherit the land.[28]

1.7 Act of Union of 1800

By the Act of Union in 1800, Ireland was officially under British dominion, albeit without benefit, as Ireland became even more underprivileged and the differences between people of these two nations also broadened. As the Irish parliament at Dublin moved to Westminster in London, the representation of MPs was considerably unequal, with only 105 Irish representatives out of 658.[29] British Ministers, governing Ireland from London, showed little compassion towards the plight of the Irish, as demonstrated by a statement made by British representative Earl Grey: "Ireland is the one weak place in the solid fabric of British power; Ireland is the one deep (I had almost said ineffaceable) blot upon the brightness of British honour. Ireland is our disgrace. It is the reproach, the standing disgrace, of this country that Ireland remains in the condition she is."[30]

1.8 The Potato and Ireland

Ireland got its most common food, the potato, from the Andes in South America. The first European visitors to the Andes were Spanish conquistadors under the command of Francisco Pizarro, who made an attack on the indigenous Inca in 1532. After conquering their territory, potatoes, a commodity of the Columbian Exchange, were introduced to

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[27] Egan, *The Immortal Irishman*, 9–10.

[28] Samantha, Howell, "From Oppression to Nationalism: The Irish Penal Laws of 1695," *Hohonu* 14 (2016): 21, https://hilo.hawaii.edu/campuscenter/hohonu/volumes/documents/FromOppressiontoNationalism-TheIrishPenalLawsof1695SamanthaHowell.pdf.

[29] Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845–52* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), 6.

[30] Noel Kissane, *The Irish Famine: The Documentary History* (Dublin: National Library of Ireland, 1995), 10.

Europe at the end of the sixteenth century.[31] The potato, which the British looked down upon as a "lazy root," was a low-maintenance crop that grew well in the moist and sour soils of sunless Ireland.[32] This nutritious New World crop, packed with minerals, proteins and carbohydrates, made the Irish capable of surviving hungry summer months and even famines. What's more, living solely on this crop proved possible, and around 40 percent of the Irish population did so, consuming approximately fifty to eighty potatoes per day per person. With a rise in potato production came an increase in population, from 1.5 million Irish in the seventeenth century to 8.5 million in the following century.[33] The negative of the potato was its inability to be stored for long periods, causing food shortages during a crisis.[34] Such shortages were exacerbated when the potato crop failed, which is exactly what happened to the Irish.[35]

1.9 The Land-Tenure System

Landlords, farmers, and farm labourers formed three groups of the land system. A great number of the landlords were "absentee," managing the Irish land remotely, from Britain and usually indirectly via agents. Farmers rented the land from landowners and then subdivided it into small holdings of one to three acres, which were then rented to the poorest class – farm labourers.[36] These labourers worked within one of two labour systems. In the cottier system, in which rent was paid by working for the farmer, potatoes were the only viable crop, so foodstuffs such as milk, butter, meat, and eggs vanished from the labourer's diet.[37] In the conacre system, in which excessive rents were paid by crop sales, highly profitable crops (barley, oats, wheat) were grown but exported, leaving the labourers to still

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[31] Charles C. Mann, *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 263; Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian, "The Columbian Exchange: A History of Disease, Food, and Ideas," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 24, no. 2 (2010): 163, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25703506.

[32] Kevin Whelan, "Pre and Post–Famine Landscape Change," in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Póirtéir (Cork: Mercier Press, 1995), 20–21, 28.

[33] K. H. Connell, "The Potato in Ireland," *Past and Present,* no. 23 (1962): 59–60, https://www.jstor.org/stable/649948; Mann, *1493*, 268–69.

[34] Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 16.

[35] Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 5.

[36] Susan Campbell Bartoletti, *Black Potatoes: The Story of the Great Irish Famine, 1845–1850* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 19; Cynthia E. Smith, "The Land–Tenure System in Ireland: A Fatal Regime," *Marquette Law. Review* 76, no. 469 (1993): 473, https://scholarship.law.marquette.edu/mulr/vol76/iss2/6.

[37] John Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking: The Great Famine and the Saga of the Irish People* (New York: Picador, 2013), 10; Joseph McPartlin, "Diet, Politics and Disaster: The Great Irish Famine," *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* 56 (1997): 213, https://doi.org/10.1079/PNS19970026.

rely solely on potatoes for sustenance.[38] The labourers had few legal rights, as the land laws favoured the British landlords who made them. Certainly, there were no legal protections from rent increases or evictions. Thus, notes one source, "Ireland was a conquered country, the Irish peasant a dispossessed man [and] his landlord an alien conqueror."[39] The land-tenure system contributed to Irish poverty, as did distant English landlords who chose to invest neither in the improvement of their holdings nor in the well-being of the laborers who worked for them. As such, the holdings often went under-utilized, and the laborers usually lived in poor conditions, often in poorly-insulated stone and turf one-room houses with thatched rooves.[40]

1.10 Guano

Peruvian guano (bird or bat droppings), used as a fertilizer, another product of the Columbian exchange, led to an agricultural boom in nineteenth-century Europe. In 1841, approximately 1,900 tons of guano were exported to Britain for agricultural purposes, increasing to almost 220,000 tons in 1845.[41] However, the guano was often infected with *phytophthora infestans*, a fungus that attacked potatoes, producing blight.[42] The fungus struggled to survive in traditional deep-ridged "lazy beds" cultivated with spades, but it thrived in the shallow ridges produced by harrows and drillers, new farming technologies in the mid-nineteenth century. Thus, a new fertilizer and new technologies combined to create a deadly monster.[43]

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[38] Smith, *The Land–Tenure System in Ireland*, 481; Joseph McPartlin, "Diet, Politics and Disaster," 213.
[39] McPartlin, "Diet, Politics and Disaster," 473.
[40] Ibid., 478; Cormac Ó Gráda, *Studies in Economic and Social History: The Great Irish Famine* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 66.
[41] Mann, *1493*, 274.
[42] Kissane, *The Irish Famine*, 13; Jean Beagle Ristaino, "Tracking Historic Migrations of the Irish Potato Famine Pathogen, *Phytophthora Infestans*," *Microbes and Infection* 4, no. 13 (2002): 1371–72, https://doi.org/10.1016/S1286-4579(02)00010-2.
[43] Mann, *1493*, 294.

2 THE POTATO FAMINE, 1845-1849

In Ireland in the late 1840s, suffering was ubiquitous and rampant.[44] The Irish potato famine (in Irish, *An Górta Mor*) or the Great Famine was a turning point for the Irish nation. The scale of the disaster made it the worst in Irish history.[45] Almost one-eighth of the Irish population perished, while another million emigrated to survive, despite paradoxically residing in the most powerful and rich country of that time – the United Kingdom.[46] The famine, a natural disaster, was aggravated by the response of the British government, prevailing economic theories of the time, as well as negative attitudes towards the Irish.[47]

2.1 1845

Before Ireland was swept by the potato disease in August 1845, blight was spotted in North America in 1843. It continued to Belgium and the Isle of Wight, from where it proceeded to England.[48] In Ireland, favorable weather in July 1845 suggested a plentiful harvest.[49] In early September, the *Dublin Evening Post* reassured readers that Ireland remained blight-free. However, on the 13th of September, the blight appeared,[50] first in Dublin and then within days, nationwide.[51] Terrified farmers watched as their tubers went from stained white to a rotting shade of brown, accompanied by a stench.[52] Despite the unpredictable nature of potato crops, with poor harvests in 1800, 1816, 1822, and 1831, the Irish found themselves unprepared for the crop's failure in 1845.[53] One-third of the potato crop failed, leaving the Irish, especially those forty percent who subsisted solely on potatoes, in want. Farm animals also grew lean, as potatoes comprised one-third of their diets.[54]

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[44] Gráda, *Studies in Economic and Social History*, 42.
[45] Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798–1998: War, Peace and Beyond* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 68–69.
[46] Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, 3–4.
[47] Mohamed Salah Harzallah, "Food Supply and Economic Ideology: Indian Corn Relief during the Second Year of the Great Irish Famine (1847)," *Historian* 68, no. 2 (2006): 305–306, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24453318.
[48] Peter M. Solar, "The Great Famine Was No Ordinary Subsistence Crisis," in *Famine: The Irish Experience 900–1900; Subsistence Crisis and Famines in Ireland*, ed. E. Margaret Crawford (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1989), 112.
[49] Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845–1849* (London: Penguin, 1991), 39.
[50] Kissane, *The Irish Famine*, 20–21.
[51] Christine Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 31.
[52] Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 27.
[53] L. A. Clarkson, "Conclusion: Famine and Irish History," in *Famine: The Irish Experience 900–1900; Subsistence Crisis and Famines in Ireland*, ed. E. Margaret Crawford (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1989), 224.
[54] Christine Kinealy, *A Death–Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland* (Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997), 49.

After the Scientific Commission acknowledged the gravity of the situation, concrete actions were taken. A Temporary Relief Commission was formed, headed by Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel. The commission was in charge of creating local relief committees, which would assure that the locals affected by the blight would receive imported Indian corn, an action organized secretly by Peel for it went against the existing Corn Laws.[55] Given the fact that the corn was not free of charge, but sold at cost, public works schemes were established so the poor could purchase it. Such public works programs were meant to be financed not merely by the government but also by the landowners.[56] Advice regarding potato storage was printed and dispersed to rural locations by the Royal Agricultural Improvement Society, but this effort proved largely ineffective, as most Irish peasants could not read English.[57] Peel then demanded the repeal of the Corn Laws, which would enable the importation of cheaper foreign crops (an effort that eventually cost him his job). Potatoes could not be imported from neighboring countries, as these were struggling with the blight too.[58]

Under the Poor Law Act of 1838, Poor Law Unions with assigned workhouses were established, guided by a Board of Guardians which was responsible for operating them.[59] However, the conditions of workhouses were purposely harrowing in order to discourage destitute peasants from making use of them: the food was inadequate,[60] families were separated, males and females were segregated, uniforms were required, strict discipline was instituted, and hard labor was required. Moreover, as the populations of the workhouses increased, so too did the deadly outbreaks of contagious diseases, such as dysentery and fevers.[61]

Meanwhile, the prices for potatoes doubled during the year, making them cost prohibitive for many. Other types of food, which could have supplemented Irish diets, were still being exported to Britain, but the government chose not to intervene in this regard.[62]

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[55] Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 34.
[56] Robert Welch, *The Cold of May Day Monday: An Approach to Irish Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 109.
[57] Ruán O'Donnell, *A Short History of Ireland's Famine* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2013), 31.
[58] Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 118.
[59] Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 33.
[60] Ibid., 136–37.
[61] Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 25, 122.
[62] Helen Litton, *The Irish Famine: An Illustrated History* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1994), 24.

2.2 1846

People were frightened that the potato disease would appear again. Given the fact that the potato acreage was so high, another harvest failure would prove devastating.[63] The worst fears of the Irish were realized in August, when the potato blight struck again, with even worse consequences. It spread quickly, destroying approximately ninety percent of the crop within a month. The situation was even more alarming because the Irish had few provisions remaining.[64] Before the imported Indian corn arrived and could be stored in food depots, the desperate and starving peasants were already reduced to crime.[65] They began rioting because food that could save them was still being exported to Britain.[66]

With the fall of Peel's government in mid-1846, a new non-interventionist administration, headed by Prime Minister John Russel, removed imports of foreign grain from the relief scheme (leaving the import to commercial traders), burdened Irish taxpayers with relief costs (by the Labour Rate Act), and focused on public works programs.[67] However, even when employed under the public works program and building roads, men could not earn as much money as they needed to feed themselves and their families – even when working up to ten hours a day.[68] To feed a family of four for a week cost 21 shillings, but public work paid maximally 6 to 8 shillings.[69] Furthermore, farmers complained that they could not find farm labourers, because farm labour paid even less than public work.[70]

When people had neither potatoes nor domestic animals on which to subsist, all that remained were roots, mushrooms, cabbage, dogs, donkeys, and cow blood (a meat substitute). Fishing the ocean was dangerous, while fishing in rivers was strictly forbidden by the landowners.[71] Out of desperation and hunger, starving Irish were committing crimes by stealing anything edible from neighbour's fields. The number of illegal activities against property significantly rose between 1846 and 1849.[72]

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[63] Gráda, *Studies in Economic and Social History*, 41.
[64] Ciarán Ó Murchadha, *The Great Famine: Ireland's Agony 1845–1852* (London: Continuum, 2011), 48.
[65] Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 86.
[66] John Keating, *Irish Famine Facts* (Dublin: Teagasc, 1996), 50.
[67] Michael de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798–1882* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 82; Christophe Gillissen, "A United Kingdom? Ireland, the Union, and Government Responses to the Great Famine," *Études Anglaises* 67, no. 3 (2014): 337–38, doi:10.3917/etan.673.0332.
[68] Simon Fowler, preface to *The Workhouse: The People, the Places, the Life behind Doors* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword History, 2014), vii; Litton, *The Irish Famine*, 39.
[69] Gillissen, "A United Kingdom?," 338.
[70] Litton, *The Irish Famine*, 43.
[71] Ibid., 45–46.
[72] Gráda, *Studies in Economic and Social History*, 43.

2.3 1847

Although potatoes were not affected by the blight this year, little was planted, due to the government's failure to provide seeds, resulting in persistent food shortages.[73] The prices of grain as well as potatoes increased rapidly, and Irish began dying of starvation. Mass graves became commonplace.[74]

The public works schemes proved inadequate in terms of relief and economic development. The wages labourers were paid were insufficient to buy food, and malnutrition kept them from performing work. In response, the government passed the Soup Kitchen Act, a.k.a. the Temporary Relief Act.[75] Copying Quakers' efforts to help the Irish, the government decided to open free soup kitchens.[76] Those who were still physically able to do so went to the soup kitchens and queued up, sometimes for hours, for a ration. Those who were not well enough to stand in queue often died. Private soup kitchens run by Protestants tried to abuse the situation by offering free soup to those who would convert.[77] The transition from public works to soup kitchens created a gap in terms of relief, as labourers were gradually laid off from public works, but active participation by private charities, such as the British Relief Association or the Quakers' Society of Friends, filled the void.[78] The soup kitchens proved beneficial, and by July, as many as 3 million people were eating "free" soup on a daily basis. Despite the success of this program, the government cancelled it after a few months.[79]

Ultimately, the government made the Irish Poor Law system the only means of relief, via the Poor Law Extension Act, which stated that Ireland's property owners should be financially responsible for the famine relief.[80] The situation worsened in September when the government passed the Gregory Clause, which stated that tenants holding more than a quarter acre of land would not be given assistance. What followed was a voluntary surrendering of land in favour of relief.[81] The purpose of the clause was to evict poor

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[73] Litton, *The Irish Famine*, 44.
[74] Cormac Ó Gráda, "Ireland's Great Famine," *ReFRESH* 15 (1992): 6, http://www.ehs.org.uk/society/pdfs/O'Grada%2015b.pdf.
[75] Margaret Crawford and Leslie A. Clarkson, *Feast and Famine: Food and Nutrition in Ireland, 1500–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 276.
[76] R. Dudley Edwards, T. Desmond Williams, and Cormac Ó Gráda, *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1845–52* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1994)*, 235–37.
[77] Litton, *The Irish Famine*, 65.
[78] Edwards, Williams, and Gráda, *The Great Famine*, 241.
[79] Kissane, *The Irish Famine*, 75.
[80] Gráda, *Studies in Economic and Social History*, 46.
[81] Gillissen, "A United Kingdom?," 342–43.

occupiers and replace them with more productive farmers offering the potential to use the land effectively.[82]

Since the financial burden of relief was placed on the landowners, who had to pay the taxes for every tenant who paid a rent under 4£ yearly, the landowners began evicting small tenants in large numbers, in order to reduce their taxes. Approximately a half-million people lost their homes for this reason between 1846 and 1854.[83] Furthermore, tenants who could not pay their rent often had their houses demolished by British troops and Irish police. Such policies led to a great amount of homelessness and desperation.[84]

2.4 1848

For all of Ireland's misfortune, and despite the government having proclaimed the famine over, the potato blight returned in July and made its appearance especially in the west.[85] People were tremendously marked by previous failures, evictions, diseases, emigration, and destruction of property.[86] It being the fourth year of distress, private charities became financially exhausted, with some of them showing signs of compassion fatigue.[87] The government threatened the unions with ending their grants. Thus, many Irish found themselves dependent on the provisions of the poor rates only, which was the government's intention.[88] Even greater pressure was put on local taxpayers, who were tasked by the government with financing the famine relief themselves. Furthermore, the British started to view the Irish as ungrateful and dependent.[89] Relief applications continued to increase, despite the fact that the workhouses were totally overcrowded and infested with diseases.[90] Irish frustration over laissez-faire policies and insufficient government intervention led to the rise of the Young Irelanders, nationalists who strongly opposed Russel's relief policies and claimed that "the present misery of Ireland was not" God's fault but "the doing of England and of the English Government."[91] Some, however, probably questioned God's innocence in the Irish suffering when, at the end of the year, a cholera epidemic spread across

[82] K. Theodore Hoppen, "British Politicians and the Transformation of Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century Ireland," in *Uncertain Futures: Essays about the Irish Past for Roy Foster*, ed. Senia Pašeta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 67–68.
[83] de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy*, 116.
[84] Egan, *The Immortal Irishman*, 38.
[85] Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 52.
[86] Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 235–36.
[87] Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, 43.
[88] Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 238.
[89] Litton, *The Irish Famine*, 175–78.
[90] Ibid., 205.
[91] Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 184–185.

the island, killing over twenty thousand. Already overworked, the Poor Law Unions could do little to combat this latest misery.[92]

2.5 1849

The government made a grant of £50,000, stressing that this was the last time it would make any means of support available.[93] It would keep its word.[94] Furthermore, evictions were encouraged by the Encumbered Estates Act, which enabled the sale of indebted estates to new landlords, preferably to English businessmen. Since the sale of indebted properties was compulsory, poverty increased as insolvent landlords and their tenants were swept away, thus losing what they had somehow managed to hold on to throughout the famine.[95]

The workhouses, designed and built for a maximum capacity of 100,000, were overloaded with 250,000 paupers. As a result of this overcrowding, diseases took their toll. Even though famine deaths were on the decline, the mortality rate remained just as high as in previous years.[96] What's more, some of the workhouses were indebted and about to close.[97]

The government further angered taxpayers by passing the Rate-in-Aid Act, which mandated that the Poor Law Unions support the affected west through increased taxes. This step again relieved the government of financial responsibility for the destitute Irish.[98] These new taxes were on top of the Temporary Relief bill from 1847, which in combination proved overwhelming for many.[99]

2.6 Emigration

One of many consequences of the famine was massive emigration, numbering over a million Irish between 1845 and 1850, North America being the most common destination. If the Irish survived the so-called coffin ships, with their terrible conditions and diseases, they faced poverty and discrimination in America.[100] Not everyone had enough savings to

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[92] Kissane, *The Irish Famine*, 118.

[93] Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 246.

[94] Gillissen, "A United Kingdom?," 344.

[95] R. V. Comerford, "The Impediments to Free Hold Ownership of Land and the Character of the Irish Land War," in *Uncertain Futures: Essays about the Irish Past for Roy Foster*, ed. Senia Pašeta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 53.

[96] Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 249–50.

[97] Kissane, *The Irish Famine*, 89.

[98] Alice Johnson, *Middle-Class Life in Victorian Belfast* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 307.

[99] Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 249–50.

[100] Kevin Kenny, "Diaspora and Comparison: The Global Irish as a Case Study," *Journal of American History* 90, no. 1 (2003): 148, doi:10.2307/3659794.

invest in the trans-Atlantic crossing, so the destitute often remained behind.[101] About three-quarters of a million Irish could manage only to get to Great Britain, where they were also discriminated against, but at least they escaped the famine.[102] The process of emigration continued for the next five years, further depleting Ireland's population.[103]

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[101] Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, 105–107.
[102] Gráda, "Ireland's Great Famine," 7.
[103] David Fitzpatrick, "Flight from Famine," in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Póirtéir (Cork: Mercier Press, 1995), 176.

3   THE BRITISH RESPONSES AND MOTIVES

Natural disaster aside, historians have long studied the human reasons for the extensive impact of the potato famine on Ireland. Clearly the British government, influenced by political and economic motives, played a role,[104] as did British preconceived opinions of the Irish, as well as religion, both Catholic and Anglican.[105]

3.1 Politics

As far as the political sphere is concerned, several political representatives had the power to make decisions in terms of government assistance during the famine. These decisions, and the policies they created, will be analysed in this chapter. Ultimately, it will be made clear that the potato famine was not just a natural disaster but a man-made disaster, the result of government non-intervention.

3.1.1   Sir Robert Peel

The office of prime minister in the time of the first appearance of the potato blight in Ireland in 1845 was occupied by Sir Robert Peel, a Tory.[106] Prime Minister Peel did not take seriously the first reports about the crop-killing fungus, stating that "there is such a tendency to exaggeration and inaccuracy in Irish reports that delay in acting on them is always desirable."[107] When Peel did realize the seriousness of the situation in November 1845, he authorized the importation of £152,000 worth of Indian corn from the United States as a means of food relief.[108] Peel hoped that these corn imports would also keep food price inflation in check, so that food would remain affordable for lower-class Irish.[109] However, the amount of imported corn proved totally insufficient. It would have taken an estimated £3 million worth of corn to mitigate the hunger in Ireland.[110] What is more, in practice, the Irish were unfamiliar with Indian corn and how to prepare it, resulting in health issues for many.[111] Even so, Peel's efforts should at least be acknowledged, as they did save some from starvation.

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[104] Peter Gray, "Ideology and the Famine," in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Póirtéir (Cork: Mercier Press, 1995), 86.
[105] Kinealy, *A Death–Dealing Famine*, 41.
[106] Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, XVII.
[107] Egan, *The Immortal Irishman*, 34.
[108] Kissane, *The Irish Famine*, 32.
[109] Benjamin Reilly, *Disaster and Human History: Case Studies in Nature, Society and Catastrophe* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2009), 268.
[110] Kissane, *The Irish Famine*, 32.
[111] Ibid., 38.

3.1.1.1 The Repeal of the Corn Laws

Peel's plan was to abolish the Corn Laws, then serving as a protection against a flood of cheaper grain into Britain, hurting British farmers. Doing so would allow the Irish lower-class to obtain cheaper grain.[112] Peel enforced the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, despite strong opposition from MP landowners. Shortly afterwards, the government fell.[113] Despite the claims that the Corn Laws should have been repealed earlier in order to have an effect before Europe, also stricken by blight, fell short of grain to export, Peel's action had positive consequences. In fact, had not Peel's government fallen, his policies might have saved more lives than the successor's policies did.

3.1.2 Lord John Russel

During 1846, with Russel and the laissez-faire oriented Whig party in power, the government policies and attitudes towards the famine remarkably changed. Although Russel's government had to enforce Peel's policies, it also moved away from them by introducing the Labour Rate Act in 1846, withdrawing and limiting government support for famine relief. From then on, localities were responsible for the financial burden of relief, with the government provision of repayable loans.[114] This laissez-faire decision placed undue burden on local governments, and limited their ability to help their citizens. The Whig government was also protectionist of free trade. The Whigs believed any interference with the market would be harmful, and thus they steered clear of reducing Irish food exports.[115]

The British clearly desired to place the financial burden of the famine solely on the Irish and the Poor Law.[116] Part of their plan consisted of coercing the middle class and landowners to employ destitute people.[117] What's more, the Whig government disapproved of the land-tenure system, with its small division of plots, considering it less profitable than larger British-owned plantations. The crisis afforded them the opportunity to reconstruct this system.[118] Evictions and emigration both helped deprive small Irish tenants of their land,

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[112] Douglas A. Irvin, "Political Economy and Peel's Repeal of the Corn Law," *Economics and Politics* 1, no. 1 (1989): 41, 55, doi:10.1111/j.1468-0343.1989.tb00004.x.
[113] BBC, "Sir Robert Peel (1788–1850)," accessed February 1, 2020, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/peel_sir_robert.shtml.
[114] Mohamed Salah Harzallah, "The Great Irish Famine: Public Works Relief during the Liberal Administration," *Nordic Irish Studies* 8 (2009): 85, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25699526.
[115] George L. Bernstein, "Liberals, the Irish Famine and the Role of the State," *Irish Historical Studies* 29, no. 116 (1995): 522, https://www.jstor.org/stable/30006773.
[116] Póirtéir, introduction to *The Great Irish Famine*, 13.
[117] Bernstein, "Liberals, the Irish Famine and the Role of the State," 431.
[118] Reilly, *Disaster and Human History*, 269.

which could then be taken over by the English, who would force moral improvements upon the Irish peasantry and continue with their Anglicization.

3.1.2.1 Providentialism

Russel's cabinet believed in Christian providentialism (or Divine Providence), meaning the Irish were being punished by God for their sins and moral wickedness such as laziness, alcoholism, dependency on others, and a lack of discipline. This perception of divine intensions remained unhindered, despite the cost in Irish lives. When the blight struck Ireland for the second time in 1846, such beliefs together with the government's laissez-faire policies led the British to provide as little help as possible to the Irish.[119] However, it could be argued that the Irish were a product of centuries of constant British oppression. After all, having no land, few rights and being subjugated results in dependency.

3.1.2.2 Moralism

Moralism was closely connected to Providentialism, belonging to the set of ideologies held by British government representatives, namely Charles Edward Trevelyan and Charles Wood. The ideology criticised the demoralized Irish character, for which God's displeasure and anger was manifested in the form of famine. Moralists sermonized principles of self-help, arguing that provision of relief would not alter immoral behaviour.[120] Therefore, Wood and Trevelyan believed that the blight was a heavenly call for change to the Irish. Moreover, the limited relief the government did provide should have taught the Irish self-reliance.

3.1.2.3 Public works

During and after the famine, the public works schemes were highly criticized for inefficiency, which cost many destitute victims' lives. First of all, the projects given by the government lacked meaning, as roads built by the poor often led nowhere. Secondly, landowners felt like competitors, as the laborers continued applying for schemes offering higher wages, leaving landowners' lands uncultivated.[121] Thirdly, the wages paid to laborers proved to be insufficient to purchase sustenance, due to inflation. And last but not least, expecting hard labor from malnourished workers was ill-conceived, unrealistic, and short-sighted.[122]

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[119] Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 154.
[120] Ibid., 91.
[121] Bernstein, "Liberals, the Irish Famine and the Role of the State," 522, 524.
[122] Harzallah, "The Great Irish Famine," 90.

3.1.2.4 Soup Kitchens

After the unsuccessful public works program, the Russell administration tried a different method of assistance. A lengthy time gap between closing down the public works and providing free soup was highly criticized for killing thousands who relied solely on the poor law and charities.[123] The Temporary Relief Act provided the destitute Irish with free soup, financed by repayable government loans. By the end of summer 1847, as many as three million desperate Irish received daily bowls of soup. Despite the fact that the composition of the soup was nutritionally inadequate and rather watery, historians commend this form of relief for preventing further deaths.[124] However, Russell, convinced of Irish dependence and presuming the crisis to be ending, halted the Temporary Relief Act in autumn of that year.[125] Criticism is to the point, as the relatively cheap soup (even less expensive than the imported food of that year) was provided only for a couple of months, despite awareness of another potato crop failure also in 1847.[126] Fears of infinite support and Irish dependency outweighed the desire to help.

3.1.2.5 Workhouses

The Irish Poor Law, constituted in Ireland in 1838, presented limited support during the years of famine, as the workhouses could admit merely up to 100,000 destitute people.[127] The law originated from an English companion – the English Poor Law (1834), giving the impression of being more rigorous in various aspects. Not only could aid be given only within workhouses, but no provision was meant for the workhouses being fully occupied.[128] What's more, the Law of Settlement was excluded, giving Irish a smaller form of government assistance than English had at their disposal. The author of the Irish Poor Law, George Nicholls, recognized its inadequacy in case of enduring famine.[129] How could the government expect that the Irish Poor Law would cope with an extensively long famine, without any additional relief, when workhouse capacity was exceeded? Making the workhouses the major form of relief during the famine was totally ill-fated, especially when

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[123] Mary E. Daly, "The Operations of Famine Relief, 1845–47," in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Póirtéir (Cork: Mercier Press, 1995), 133.

[124] Gráda, *Studies in Economic and Social History*, 45.

[125] Kissane, *The Irish Famine*, 75.

[126] Ibid., 82.

[127] Christine Kinealy, "The Poor Law during the Great Famine," in *Famine: The Irish Experience 900–1900; Subsistence Crisis and Famines in Ireland*, ed. E. Margaret Crawford (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1989), 159.

[128] Christine Kinealy, "The Role of the Poor Law during the Famine," in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Póirtéir (Cork: Mercier Press, 1995), 106.

[129] Kinealy, "The Poor Law during the Great Famine," 158.

workhouses were purposely designed to provide harsh conditions so as to discourage the poor from seeking aid in them. Destitute persons were viewed as physically and mentally weak, and therefore unworthy of assistance.[130] Ultimately, the Irish Poor Law catered less to humanitarian purposes and more to changing Irish behaviour[131] – "you went in a man … and came out a pauper."[132]

3.1.2.6 *Charles Edward Trevelyan*

An assistant to the secretary of treasury, Charles Edward Trevelyan was a sympathizer of the laissez-faire approach with a view of helping the poor Irish by employing them, not feeding them.[133] Being a Whig as well as a Moralist, his attitude mirrored antagonistic opinions of the British – providing the poor with relief will not make them independent or well-behaved and that God "sent the calamity to teach the Irish a lesson … [and it] must not be too much mitigated." As a nationalist, he was of the providential opinion understanding famine as – "the judgement of God on an indolent and unself–reliant people." Unluckily for the destitute Irish, the treasury was responsible for financing relief in terms of stored food as well as public works programmes.[134] Trevelyan also despised the Irish for their dependency on potatoes, an easily cultivated crop that destroyed the Irish work ethic, led them to drink heavily, and to be reliant on others.[135] Furthermore, Trevelyan shared Malthus's opinion that by helping the poorest class, an increase in the population would be encouraged, thus worsening the situation.[136] In 1848, Trevelyan also deprived the Irish of private charity by publicly claiming in the *Edinburg Review* that the famine had ended and that the government relief works had mitigated a dreadful situation. This opinion accelerated donor fatigue, reducing the last means of relief.[137] Based on the provided evidence, clearly, the policies created to confront food shortages rather aggravated than alleviated the famine.

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[130] Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 53.
[131] Ibid., 157.
[132] Egan, *The Immortal Irishman*, 49.
[133] Christophe Gillisen, "Charles Trevelyan, John Mitchel and the Historiography of the Great Famine," *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* 19, no. 2 (2014): 195–96, https://doi.org/10.4000/rfcb.281.
[134] Kinealy, *A Death–Dealing Famine*, 4, 91.
[135] Ibid., 154.
[136] James Mullin, *The Great Irish Famine* (Moorestown: The Committee, 1996), 11.
[137] Melissa Fegan, *Literature and the Irish Famine, 1845–1919* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 28.

3.2 Economic

3.2.1 Economic theories – Smith and Malthus

After the affiliation of Ireland to the United Kingdom, politicians were debating measures and policies to be implemented in Ireland. Ireland was perceived as a backward, overpopulated country overflowing with idle peasants, but most importantly as a perilous element, which might stand in the way of British economic development. Such views were rather more simplistic than realistic, as prejudices tend to be, and offered a distorted picture of Ireland.[138] This chapter deals with perspectives of two leading economists of their day, who greatly influenced the steps taken by the Whig government and the continued exportation of Irish produce to Britain during the famine.

Firstly, Scottish economist Adam Smith (1723-1790) proposed that in order to keep the market prosperous during difficult times, no government interference should occur. If it did occur, the interests of private merchants would be undermined, followed by a reduction in imports.[139] Smith claimed that "the free exercise [of trade] is not only the best palliative of the inconveniences of a dearth, but the best preventative of that calamity."[140] The British government adopted the theory, resulting in a much higher interest in the health of the market than in the health of the Irish. Britain drove benefits for the ruling class forward with no concern for the poor.

Secondly, English economist Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) theorized that providing poor people with any kind of relief would make them more sluggish and indolent, creating a barrier to prosperity of capital.[141] What's more, aiding the poor would result in higher fertility rates, encouraging population growth. In his view, famine could deter the poor from irresponsible conceptions.[142] Another theory of his contended that famine was caused by uncontrolled overpopulation exceeding food supplies. About Ireland specifically, he argued that it "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."[143] This theory greatly influenced the prejudicial mindset of British politicians, who believed

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[138] Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 1–3.
[139] Harzallah, "Food Supply and Economic Ideology," 308.
[140] Gráda, *Studies in Economic and Social History*, 51.
[141] Harzallah, "Food Supply and Economic Ideology," 309.
[142] Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 11–12.
[143] Michael Perelman, *The Perverse Economy: The Impact of Markets on People and the Environment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 34.

that hardship and distress must be allowed so as to reduce the overly-abundant Irish population.[144]

Other contemporaries, such as lawyer Nassau Senior (1790-1864) or philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), offered their views regarding emigration. According to them, it was highly welcomed, as it could improve Ireland's condition, but it should not be subsidized by the government.[145] These views led the government to put forth a strategy of minimal financial assistance during famine emigration, leaving the financial burden on the Irish emigrants or their relatives living abroad.[146]

3.2.2 Irish Exports during the Crisis

During the first twenty years of the nineteenth century, the production of grain increased as well as exports of this crop. Even though it might had been prosperous for the country, eventually this expansion appeared to be a double-edged sword. In times of unfavourable weather followed by harvest failures, people were in short supply of grain, which led to a higher dependency on another crop – potatoes.[147] However, when neither potatoes nor any other food resources are available, human catastrophe follows, just as it did during the potato famine. Ireland was an agriculturally oriented country. In contrast to Britain, the Industrial Revolution was not ongoing in Ireland. Therefore, many from the rural labour force were then employed in the industrial sector, leaving Britain with a high demand for agricultural produce. As a result, Ireland became the main exporter to Britain.[148]

The Irish were surrounded by a sufficient amount of food in the form of crops, which they cultivated. From corn, wheat, oats to barley – all of these crops were occupying more than three-quarters of the land – but could not be consumed by Irish. Instead, around 1.5 billion pounds of grain were sent to Britain. Surprisingly, not only crops were exported during the time of hunger. Ireland was also a huge exporter of beef.[149] According to a parliamentary list, hundreds of million pounds of flour and a quarter of a million livestock were exported from Ireland during the first year of crisis.[150] On top of that, out of all

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[144] Edward J. O'Boyle, "Classical Economics and the Great Irish Famine: A Study in Limits," *Forum for Social Economics* 35, no. 2 (2006): 23, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02746430.

[145] Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 305.

[146] Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 292.

[147] Clarkson, "Conclusion: Famine and Irish History," 224.

[148] Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 9–10.

[149] Mann, *1493*, 37.

[150] Kelly, *The Graves Are Walking*, 65.

cultivated crops, no more than 20 percent related to potato production.[151] Yet, the government did not ban food exports for two reasons: First, the prevailing laissez-faire convinced the government that any market intervention could negatively affect the economy and repress the private merchants.[152] The profits from grain sold on the open market were significantly higher for domestic producers and therefore, important for the government to sustain.[153] Second, many members of parliament, or their friends and relatives, were profiting, directly or indirectly, from Irish exports. British politicians were unlikely to support any proposal that would damage their own economic prospects.

Based on the evidence, the Irish would not have starved during the potato famine, as Ireland had sufficient food resources besides potatoes to feed its masses, had the British government made the decision to halt food imports from the Emerald Isle. Yet, for Russel's administration, halting imports was simply inconceivable and contradictory to the laissez-faire ideology of the day. In other words, ideology trumped human life. Perhaps not everyone would have been saved by shutting down the exports, but clearly many more would have survived. What's more, Britain pushed the Irish to self-dependency while at the same time capitalizing on Irish produce.

3.3 Religion

3.3.1 Irish Catholics and British Protestants

Irish Catholics were disliked by British Protestants. England, during colonization, did not only strive to subjugate the land but also transform Irish beliefs and religious practices into those of Protestants. This effort endured throughout the following centuries.[154] The Irish Catholics were oppressed and restricted from various aspects of life by the series of Penal Laws in order to bring about the extinction of Catholicism.[155] Imposed restrictions on Catholics included those against possessing weapons, practising any ecclesiastical jurisdiction outside of the kingdom, holding any public office, voting, purchasing, leasing or owning land, educating themselves or their children, taking part in a Catholic service, engaging in certain professions, etc.[156] These laws were formulated over 70 years and lasted

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[151] Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 32.

[152] Gillisen, "Charles Trevelyan, John Mitchel," 198.

[153] Natalie Goldstein, *Globalization and Free Trade* (New York: Facts on File, 2007), 11.

[154] Timothy J. White, "The Impact of the British Colonialism on Irish Catholicism and National Identity: Repression, Reemergence, and Divergence," *Études Irlandaises* 35, no. 1 (2010): 24–25, https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.1743.

[155] Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 35.

[156] Seumas MacManus, *The Story of the Irish Race* (New York: Chartwell Books, 2018), 459–62.

for 140 years (until Catholic emancipation), leaving a profound effect on the Irish Catholics even in the time of the famine. Due to the discriminatory restrictions of the previous centuries, Irish Catholics, who comprised 75 percent of the population, became extremely poor, making them the most vulnerable to famine.[157] Given that Irish Catholics were denied seats in the Parliament until 1829, and even after were far exceeded by Anglo-Irish Protestant elite, they could not enforce sufficient assistance.[158] This provides clear support for the argument that Irish Catholics, socially as well as politically impoverished, were left with insufficient means to overcome the famine. They needed British help, which was not forthcoming.

3.3.2   The Vatican's and Clergy's Responses to the Famine

In March 1847, Pope Pius IX issued an encyclical, *Praedecessores Nostros*, through which he asked Catholics internationally for their support in the form of three days of prayer for the impoverished Irish people. The Pope also donated 1,000 Roman crowns (250£) to the cause, and he urged Catholics worldwide to give alms.[159] With respect to the timing of the contributions, it could be argued that the relief came two-years late, especially since the Vatican had been informed about the miserable Irish situation in the beginning of 1846. Nevertheless, after the pope's intervention, a large amount of money was collected, which should be considered favourably.

The Catholic Church in France was proactive, offering help to the Irish even before the pope. In fact, French bishops urged the pope to request international aid.[160] Catholic clergy in India, Canada, the United States, South American countries, and also Britain, made recognizable efforts to collect donations.[161]

Surprisingly, during the famine, a significantly large investment by the Church of Ireland was made into church renovations. Even though many Irish parishioners had neither food nor shelter, the church spent £25,726 on renovations between 1847 and 1849.[162] For this, the church should be faulted. Likewise, the Catholic church should be criticized for

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[157] Guest Contribution, "The Great Irish Potato Famine," History Cooperative, last modified October 31, 2009, accessed April 4, 2020, https://historycooperative.org/the-irish-famine/#_ftn2.

[158] "Emancipation," UK Parliament, accessed April 5, 2020, https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/religion/overview/emancipation/.

[159] Grace Neville, "'Il y a des larmes dans leurs chiffres': French Famine Relief for Ireland, 1847–84," *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* 19, no. 2 (2014): 69, http://doi.org/10.4000/rfcb.261.

[160] Ibid., 71.

[161] Christine Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland: The Kindness of Strangers* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 135–38.

[162] Liam Kennedy, *Unhappy the Land: The Most Oppressed People Ever, the Irish?* (Sallins: Merrion, 2016), 116.

demonstrating a lack of interest during the first year of the blight. Its entire attention was instead focused on the prospect of constructing Queen's Colleges – new universities.[163] To think that starving people would appreciate a higher education is highly improbable.

On the other side, some of the Irish Catholic priests deserve praise for raising funds on their own, without the support of the institution. Such efforts continued, even when private charities gave up. Unlike many other priests who were supporters of the Whig's policies, especially Archbishop John MacHale was not afraid to express dissatisfaction and disapproval with the government relief policies.[164]

3.3.3 Souperism

Negative and bitter opinions arose with practises of evangelical missionaries, who were convincing poor Irish afflicted by famine to convert to Protestantism between 1845 and 1852.[165] The process of souperism, a.k.a. proselytism, got underway in the Catholic western part of Ireland, where, with the influence of local landlords and clergymen, evangelicals established their colonies. In exchange, the converts could benefit from the community's financial self-reliance in the form of various opportunities regarding housing, land, salary, and education.[166] What's more, pre-millennialists, who were an offshoot of Evangelism, believed in the power and influence of divine providence, and understood famine as a God-given chance to convert Catholics.[167] On one hand, these actions caused mistrust among the starving regarding private charities, but on the other hand, more people survived.

3.4 Charity

It is said that without the support of private charities, far more deaths would have occurred as a result of the Great Hunger. This is undeniably true, as previous chapters proved that the government's assistance with its stringent ideology was insufficient. Unlike the British government, those who donated any kind of help generally did not differentiate between worthy poor and supposedly unworthy poor. Especially when the British government cut its major relief efforts, the poor were for the most part reliant on the aid of private charities and individuals.[168]

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[163] Christine Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland*, 126.
[164] Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 154.
[165] Irene Whelan, "The Stigma of Souperism," in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Póirtéir (Cork: Mercier Press, 1995), 135.
[166] Ibid., 138–39.
[167] Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 159.
[168] René Provost and Payam Akhavan, eds. *Confronting Genocide* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 23.

During previous famines, it was in a government's interest to provide appropriate relief. During the Great Famine, the government leaving the Irish to rely solely on the "locally financed poor law system" produced a disastrous outcome that made Ireland a centre of transnational attention.[169] Thanks to the media, people worldwide were horrified by the harsh conditions and number of deaths taking place in Ireland.[170] Even across the Atlantic, news spread as how the British government was approaching the potato famine, and consequently, Boston raised relief funds.[171] Even further removed, Mauritius, the Seychelles and India also proved generous.[172]

Quakers, known as the Society of Friends, were the first to open soup kitchens. Furthermore, they donated linens and clothes.[173] This group also made sure, via the Irish and British press, that the wider public knew the true depths of Irish misery.[174] And, the Quaker's extensive overseas connections led to support from many American cities, especially those with large Irish immigrant populations.[175]

The British Relief Association also stands out for having raised the total highest amount of donations – £470,000. Even Queen Victoria sent £1,000 to Ireland through the association. Not only that, this organization remained strong even when other private charities were experiencing donor fatigue.[176]

The total financial aid granted by Great Britain to Ireland (£9.5 million) paled in comparison to money spent on similar events, such as the £70 million spent on the Crimean War (1853-1856).[177] In comparison with Russia's financial relief provisions during a less severe famine at the end of the nineteen century, British relief was negligible.[178] Moreover, Britain blocked certain donations from abroad. Due to Queen's donation of £1,000, no other monarch was allowed to contribute more, as it would offend royal protocol. Sultan Abdulmecid of Turkey wished to donate a much higher amount but was dissuaded from doing so by British diplomats.[179] Furthermore, the British closed the door to further

[169] Enda Delaney, "Ireland's Great Famine: A Transnational History," in *Transnational Perspectives on Modern Irish History*, ed. Niall Whelehan (London: Routledge, 2015), 114.
[170] Ibid., 108.
[171] Christine Kinealy, "Saving the Irish Poor: Charity and the Great Famine," *Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain* 12 (2015): 4–5, https://journals.openedition.org/mimmoc/pdf/1845.
[172] Delaney, "Ireland's Great Famine," 106.
[173] Kinealy, "Saving the Irish Poor," 5.
[174] Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 66.
[175] Delaney, "Ireland's Great Famine," 111–12.
[176] Litton, *The Irish Famine*, 57.
[177] Kissane, *The Irish Famine*, 171.
[178] Provost and Akhavan, *Confronting Genocide*, 24.
[179] Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine*, 72.

donations by declaring the famine to be over in 1848, which assured donors that further financial support was unnecessary.[180] This action deprived the Irish poor of much needed external help, which could have saved many lives. Even so, private charity, both from home and abroad, was a godsend for many.

3.5 Race

The hostile attitude of the English towards the Irish dates back to the sixteenth century. Certain aspects can be found in the time of colonization, when England was keen to gain power over Ireland. English colonists perceived the indigenous Gaelic Irish as treacherous inhabitants, who could only be brought under control with violence. Even though commands from the monarch were not that violent, still English colonists employed such brutal methods like unmerciful slaughtering, which was far away from what was regulated by the law.[181] Moreover, the Irish were long seen by British eyes as an incompetent nation to guide themselves and therefore, the British presumed that domination was needed to correct it – "Remember you are dealing with a people who in the mass are almost uncivilized. Like children they require governing with the hand of power: They require authority, and will bear it. A more enlightened community would not require it and would not bear it."[182] Such an incompetency of self-government was part of the Irish character, as was immaturity and emotional and mental instability. The Irish were even considered mentally ill and prone to insanity, which was unlikely to ever be cured.[183] The Irish fierce character along with indolence and drinking habits could reflect poorly on the English tyranny that strived to deprive the Irish of independency over the centuries. One scholar has even noted that, before the English started to conquer Ireland, the Celts were tranquil people, who did not know what drunkenness meant.[184]

English enmity towards the Irish is likely to be comparable to the one towards Indians. In both cases, the message of civilizing and educating was replaced by cruel exploitation. Like Irish, Indians were considered to be unsteady inhabitants not capable of maximally

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[180] Christine Kinealy, "Private Donations to Ireland during an Gorta Mór," *Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society* 17, no. 2 (1998): 119, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25746804.

[181] Nicholas P. Canny, "The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America," *William and Marry Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1973): 578, 581, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1918596.

[182] O'Boyle, "Classical Economics and the Great Irish Famine," 44.

[183] Michael Robinson, "Perceptions of the Mentally Ill Irish Population during the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century," *Études irlandaises* 42, no. 2 (2017): 65–6, https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5306.

[184] Luke Gibbons, "Race against Time: Racial Discourse and Irish History," *Oxford Literary Review* 13, no. 1/2 (1991): 103–4, www.jstor.org/stable/43973712.

utilizing their land and therefore, the more English thought they could possess it.[185] Furthermore, during colonizing New England, the colonizers observed the Indian's way of living and noticed that the sleeping habits, a way of building the houses as well as hairstyle corresponded to the Irish ones.[186] The Irish were also associated with blacks, even though the Irish skin colour was white. Moral characteristics were identical to the inferior race of blacks – indolence, irrationality, childishness, and lack of self-control.[187]

3.5.1 Racism during the Famine

The cartoons of the British paper *Punch* mocked the nature of middle-class Irish men during the years of the famine and had a wide reach among the public. The purpose was to influence peoples' minds and opinions against the Irish. The paper inclined to the opinion that the famine persisted over the years because of Irish indigenous morality. In some cases, the Irish man was also depicted as an ape-like being, called "biped livestock," ungrateful for the British "help," rather barbarous, and in favour of rebellion. No images regarding the famine and related Irish suffering were included.[188] Both the Irish and Negroes were linked to chimpanzees so as to show that these races had in common savage and primitive natures and that they were intellectually far from what the British were like.[189] An image of the stereotypical Irish Celt, "Paddy," sitting on an English man's shoulders, depicts the heavy burden of Irish dependency on Britain. Paddy's protruding hairy jaw along with sharp teeth portrays a wild ape-man.[190] In a sense, the paper stereotyped the Irish population, pointing out Irish mendicancy and dependency, showing the British man as superior, better off – all showed the racial inferiority of the Irish.[191] Even before the famine, periodicals were spreading a message, describing the Irish destitution as caused by their Celtic culture and by refusing Anglicization, which could salvage them.[192] All of these racial preconceptions and

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[185] Canny, "The Ideology of English Colonization," 596.

[186] Gibbons, "Race against Time," 98.

[187] Bruce Nelson, *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 43.

[188] Peter Gray, "Punch and the Great Famine," *History Ireland* 1, no. 2 (1993): 26–31, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27724066.

[189] Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 167.

[190] Michael de Nie, *The Famine, Irish Identity, and the British Press, 1798–1882* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 29; Kevin Kenny, "Race, Violence, and Anti-Irish Sentiment in the Nineteenth Century," in *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States*, ed. J. J. Lee and Marion R. Casey (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 364.

[191] Valérie Morrison, "Visual Representations of the Great Famine 1845–2010," *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* 19, no. 2 (2014): 174, https://doi.org/10.4000/rfcb.279.

[192] de Nie, *The Famine, Irish Identity*, 27.

opinions towards stereotyped lazy ungrateful Irish were consequently reflected in politics and the extent of aid.

3.5.2 Scientific racism

Starting in the nineteenth century, scientific racism initiated a social debate about a matter of dirtiness and cleanliness in connection with physiognomy. Already the Nordic British feared to be exposed to diseased Irish, who could contaminate their pure blood. The poor Irish, labouring class, and Irish immigrants were described by scientists according to these traits – dirty, inferior, mentally indisposed, and insane. No insight was given to the fact that the Irish did not choose these attributes, but they were formed as a result of intentional social degradation regarding the social strata to which the Irish were ascribed. The Irish were under the attack of racialist denigration and were habitually associated with savage, primitive monkeys from the scientific point of view.[193] A physiognomy associated the Irish race with a more noticeable jaw bone, equal to apes, and concluded they were of a lower evolutionary form.[194] British anthropologist John Beddoe (1826-1911) made an association between the Africans and the Irish and concluded the Irish with dark hair to be descended from Africans.[195] The onset of scientifically proved biological inferiority drew the idea of a racial hierarchy divided into "the ape-like 'lower races' to the more evolved and thus superior (white) races."[196] The Irish were inferior to the British, who as a dominant group used their power to subordinate a dehumanise the less powerful.

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[193] Gregory B. Lee, "Dirty, Diseased and Demented: The Irish, the Chinese, and Racist Representation," *Transtext(e)s Transcultures* 12 (2017): 1–3, https://journals.openedition.org/transtexts/pdf/1011.
[194] Anthony S. Wohl, "Racism and Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian Ireland," Victorianweb, last modified 1990, accessed March 12, 2020, http://www.victorianweb.org/history/race/Racism.html.
[195] Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity,* 167.
[196] Bryan Fanning, *Racism and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 11.

4 CONTROVERSY OVER GENOCIDE

Over the years, a controversy over the Great Irish Famine being a genocide has been present in Ireland and beyond. This opinion has its supporters and opponents, and as a result it is difficult to draw a conclusion. The question of genocide arises when taken into account that a large amount of food was exported when millions starved; that the British government did not stop evictions and emigration but, quite to the contrary, strengthened these processes by laws; persistent antipathy and anti-Irish racism by the British; enduring confiscation of lands and dispossessing Irish of their religion, trade, and language.

Even though the government's response was weak and insufficient, and politicians generally held the opinion that the Irish should deal with their poverty themselves and use their resources, some claim that such neglect cannot be referred to as genocide. In other words, they argue that no "intent to destroy" was present.[197] It is clear that the British were in pursuit of change regarding the Irish behaviour and that the government wanted to be free from the Irish financial dependency. From the point of view of Francis Boyle, the British government policy must be understood as genocide. He confirms his argument by citing Article II of the Genocide Convention, where he finds that the British government "deliberately inflicted on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part" as well as "caused serious bodily and mental harm to the Irish." As such, government relief coincides with genocidal intentions.[198] Similarly, an Irish historian Tim Pat Coogan argues with conviction that whatever the British did or did not do was done deliberately, making their actions genocidal.[199]

On the other side, Irish historian Cormac Ó Gráda avoids this term and rather characterizes the British policy as "doctrinaire neglect." He adds that at fault was not as much anti-Irish racism as dogmatic political economy.[200] Peter Gray alike concludes that the policy taken cannot be considered intentional genocide but rather policy wrong assumptions with deadly consequences.[201]

That the Great Irish Famine was not a genocide is supported by the fact that half a million Irish were farmers, who were in favour of exports. These Irish could make a profit

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[197] Provost and Akhavan, *Confronting Genocide*, 25.

[198] Francis Boyle, "The Great Irish Famine Was Genocide," *Catholic New Times*, March 29, 2010, 7, http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.k.utb.cz/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=65960585&lang=cs&site=ehost-live.

[199] Y.F., "The Irish Famine: Opening the Old Wounds," *Economist*, December 12, 2012, https://www.economist.com/prospero/2012/12/12/opening-old-wounds.

[200] Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond*, 10.

[201] Gray, "Ideology and the Famine," 103.

from higher prices on the British market, therefore lacking concern for the sufferings and misfortune of their poor neighbours. As a result, people of the same Irish race, just belonging to a different class, were profiting from exports, which undermines the genocide theory.[202]

Overall, the famine cannot be labelled as genocide. Certain steps, though minimal, were taken, even if the British were swayed by misleading ideologies. The government condemned the Irish for their inability to benefit from relief measures, an inability derived from their perceived defective natures. The blight and subsequent starvation of the poorest class appeared as a favourable development for the ruling British nation in its attempt to reconstruct the Irish society and land system. Yet, the British did not deliberately kill the Irish; they just allowed death to happen.

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[202] Fin Dwyer, "Was the Great Famine a Genocide?," *Irish History Podcast*, podcast audio, July 31, 2019, accessed February 10, 2020, https://irishhistorypodcast.ie/was-the-great-famine-a-genocide/.

CONCLUSION

The Irish potato famine of 1845-1849 left a massive scar on the whole Irish nation, which is still being felt. The blight was not the only aspect causing tremendous devastation. Fear and misguided beliefs did great damage as well: fear of the Irish becoming even more dependent on Britain, fear of interfering in the market and disrupting trade, and beliefs that the Irish deserved the famine due to their inefficient farming system and their slothful character. The Irish nation had been degraded by Britain for centuries, and the physical and social pre-famine conditions were knowingly set by the British. Irish self-reliance, demanded by the British government, had been taken away by that same government. The famine could have clearly been avoided, as sufficient aid certainly existed. The export of produce from Ireland in the time of greatest need could have been curtailed if not shut down completely. The public work schemes would not have failed if the wages had been adjusted for inflation, allowing poor Irish to purchase necessary sustenance. Furthermore, the workhouses could have provided humanitarian relief, had they not been specifically designed to change Irish behaviour. Undoubtedly, the remedy in form of soup kitchens could have lasted longer than a couple of months, especially after knowing their positive outcomes. Evictions would not be supported, if the British government did not decide to reconstruct the criticized Irish farming system (which they implemented themselves) in the worst time of crisis. But, most importantly, the famine should not have been proceeded as a local Irish matter, especially since most of the Irish wealth was in British hands. So much could have been done to help the Irish, had not British politicians been influenced by economic and religious theories of the day to resist charity, on the grounds that it bred dependence and stalled personal development. Protestant bigotry against Catholics did not help the situation. Nor did the Penal Laws, which put Irish Catholics at a profound disadvantage. On top of that, racial stereotypes of the Irish influenced some British not to help, and others to take a harsh approach towards the famine. Although the famine was not a genocide, it was an example of how Anglocentrism could kill. The British could have done much more to alleviate the famine, and for their malignant neglect, they will forever have the blood of innocents on their hands.

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