

Genocide

Irish Famine  
Unit VI

# VI

# Genocide

**Performance Objectives:**

The student will weigh the opinions of historians and attempt to come to a conclusion about genocide in Ireland during the Great Famine.

**Teaching/learning Strategies and Activities:**

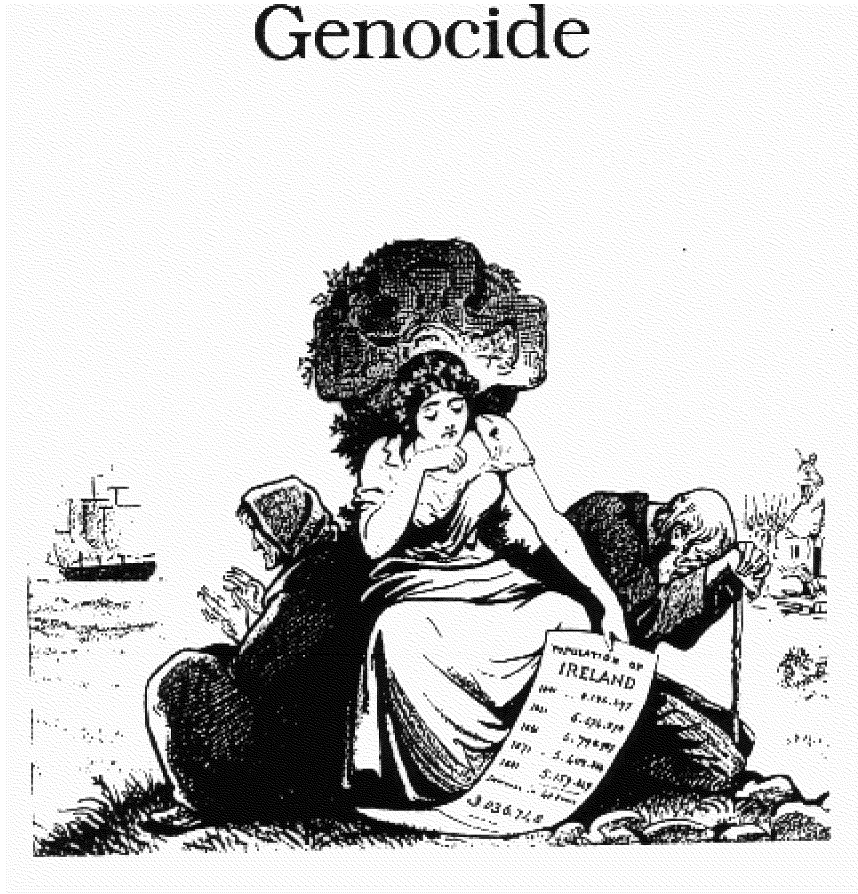
Students will study the opinions of historians and compare them with definitions of genocide provided.

Activity 1. Students will read "Genocide", answer questions following the readings and discuss the issues raised.

**Instructional Materials/Resources:**

"Genocide" (see footnotes for sources)

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**Irish Famine  
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Activity 1**

**GENOCIDE**

The American Heritage Dictionary defines genocide as: "The systematic, planned annihilation of a racial, political or cultural group."

The United Nations Convention on Genocide, adopted by the U.N. in 1948 lists this as one of the acts which qualify: "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its destruction in whole or part."

Richard L. Rubenstein in his book The Age of Triage: Fear and Hope in an Overcrowded World offers yet another definition. He states, "...a government is as responsible for a genocidal policy when its officials accept mass death as a necessary cost of implementing their policies as when they pursue genocide as an end in itself." (1.)

**BRITISH, IRISH AND AMERICAN VOICES:**

**IMMORAL SELF-INTEREST**

Oxford history professor James Anthony Froude, who once wrote that Irish folk were "more like squalid apes than human beings" wrote the following in his book, English in Ireland :\_"England governed Ireland for what she deemed her own interest, making her calculations on the gross balance of her trade ledgers, and leaving moral obligations aside, as if right and wrong had been blotted out of the statute book of the Universe." (2.)

**Dr. GRAY**

In his essay, " Ideology and the Famine", Belfast-born and Cambridge-educated historian Peter Gray wrote that:

"It is difficult to refute the indictment made by one humanitarian English observer in the later stages of the Famine, that amidst 'an abundance of cheap food...very many have been done to death by pure tyranny'. The charge of culpable neglect of the consequences of policies leading to mass starvation is indisputable. That a conscious choice to pursue moral or economic objectives at the expense of human life was made by several ministers is also demonstrable."

Professor Gray concludes, however, that British government policy "was not a policy of deliberate genocide", but a dogmatic refusal to admit the policy was wrong and "amounted to a sentence of death to many thousands." (3.)

**PROFESSOR CLARK**

Dennis Clark, an Irish-American historian, wrote in The Irish in Philadelphia that the famine was "the culmination of generations of neglect, misrule and repression. It was an epic of English colonial cruelty and inadequacy. For the landless cabin dwellers it meant emigration or extinction... (4.)

The dimensions of the calamity can hardly be delineated by simple statistics. England had presided over an epochal disaster too monstrous and too impersonal to be a mere product of individual ill-will or the fiendish outcome of a well-planned conspiracy. It was something worse: the cumulative antagonism and corruption of the English ruling class was visited with crushing intensity upon a long-enfeebled foe. It was as close to genocide as colonialism would come in the nineteenth century."

About the 50,000 evictions that took place during the Famine, Clark wrote: "The British government's insistence on 'the absolute rights of landlords'" to evict farmers and their families so they could raise cattle and sheep, was a process "as close to 'ethnic cleansing' as any Balkan war ever enacted." (5.)

**PROFESSOR DONNELLY**

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Professor James S. Donnelly Jr., a historian at the University of Wisconsin, wrote the following in Landlord and Tenant in Nineteenth-Century Ireland:

"I would draw the following broad conclusion: at a fairly early stage of the Great Famine the government's abject failure to stop or even slow down the clearances (evictions) contributed in a major way to enshrining the idea of English state-sponsored genocide in Irish popular mind. Or perhaps one should say in the Irish mind, for this was a notion that appealed to many educated and discriminating men and women, and not only to the revolutionary minority..."

But Donnelly concludes otherwise: "And it is also my contention that while genocide was not in fact committed, what happened during and as a result of the clearances had the look of genocide to a great many Irish..." (6.)

### COMMISSIONER TWISLETON

When the Irish Poor Law Commissioner, Edward Twisleton resigned in protest over lack of relief aid from Britain, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Earl of Clarendon, wrote the following to British Prime Minister Lord John Russell:

"He (Twisleton) thinks that the destitution here [in Ireland] is so horrible, and the indifference of the House of Commons is so manifest, that he is an unfit agent for a policy that must be one of extermination." (7.)

In 1849 Twisleton testified that "comparatively trifling sums were required for Britain to spare itself the deep disgrace of permitting its miserable fellow subjects to die of starvation." According to Gray, the British spent 7 million Pounds for relief in Ireland between 1845 and 1850, "representing less than half of one percent of the British gross national product over five years. Contemporaries noted the sharp contrast with the 20 million Pounds compensation given to West Indian slave-owners in the 1830s." (8.)

### LORD CLARENDON

The Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Earl of Clarendon wrote a letter to Prime Minister Russell on April 26th, 1849, expressing his feelings about lack of aid from the British House of Commons:

"I do not think there is another legislature in Europe that would disregard such suffering as now exists in the west of Ireland, or coldly persist in a policy of extermination." (9.)

### PROFESSOR SENIOR

Nassau Senior, a respected economics professor at Oxford University said that the Famine in Ireland "would not kill more than one million people, and that would scarcely be enough to do any good." (10.)

### EDWARDS AND WILLIAMS

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In The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1845-52 Editors R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams wrote:

"The political commentator, the ballad singer and the unknown maker of folk-tales have all spoken about the Great famine, but is there more to be said? If man, the prisoner of time, acts in conformity with the conventions of society into which he is born, it is difficult to judge him with irrevocable harshness. So it is with the men of the famine era. Human limitations and timidity dominate the story of the Great Famine, but of great and deliberately imposed evil in high positions of responsibility there is little evidence." (11.)

**JOHN MITCHEL**

John Mitchel, leader of the Young Ireland Movement, wrote the following in 1860:

"I have called it an artificial famine: that is to say, it was a famine which desolated a rich and fertile island, that produced every year abundance and superabundance to sustain all her people and many more. The English, indeed, call the famine a "dispensation of Providence;" and ascribe it entirely to the blight on potatoes. But potatoes failed in like manner all over Europe; yet there was no famine save in Ireland. The British account of the matter, then, is first, a fraud - second, a blasphemy. The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine." (12.)

**OTHER IRISH NATIONALISTS**

In 1848, Denis Shine Lawlor suggested that Lord John Russell was a student of the poet Spenser, who had inhumanely calculated "how far English colonization and English policy might be most effectively carried out by Irish starvation." (13.)

That same year a Cork City Councilor named Brady told his audience that the British Prime Minister had "violated every pledge previously made on arriving at place and power... a million and a half Irish people perished, were smitten and offered up as a holocaust, whose blood ascended to the throne of God for redress..., but the pity was that the minister was permitted to act so with impunity."

On April 1, 1848, an editorial writer in The Nation said, "It is evident to all men that our foreign government is but a club for grave-diggers...we are decimated not by the will of God but the will of the Whigs." (14.)

**WOODHAM - SMITH**

At the end of The Great Hunger, Cecil Woodham-Smith concludes:

"These misfortunes were not part of a plan to destroy the Irish nation; they fell on the people because the government of Lord John Russell was afflicted with an extraordinary inability to foresee consequences. It has been frequently declared that the parsimony of the British Government during

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the famine was the main cause of the sufferings of the people, and parsimony was certainly carried to remarkable lengths; but obtuseness, short-sightedness and ignorance probably contributed more." (15.)

"Much of this obtuseness sprang from the fanatical faith of mid-nineteenth century British politicians in the economic doctrine of laissez-faire , no interference by government, no meddling with the operation of natural causes. Adherence to laissez-faire was carried to such a length that in the midst of one of the major famines of history, the government was perpetually nervous of being too good to Ireland and of corrupting the Irish people by kindness, and so stifling the virtues of self reliance and industry."

"In addition hearts were hardened by the antagonism then felt by the English towards the Irish, an antagonism rooted far back in religious and political history, and at the period of the famine, irritation had been added as well...It is impossible to read the letters of British statesmen of the period, Charles Wood and Trevelyan for instance, without astonishment at the influence exerted by antagonism and irritation on government policy in Ireland during the famine."

"It is not characteristic of the English to behave as they have behaved in Ireland; as a nation, the English have proved themselves to be capable of generosity, tolerance and magnanimity, but not where Ireland is concerned. As Sydney Smith, the celebrated writer and wit, wrote: 'The moment the very name of Ireland is mentioned, the English seem to bid adieu to common feeling, common prudence and common sense, and to act with the barbarity of tyrants and the fatuity of idiots.'" (16.)

### CHRISTINE KINEALY

At the end of The Great Calamity, Christine Kinealy writes:

"While it was evident that the government had to do something to help alleviate the suffering, the particular nature of the actual response, especially following 1846, suggests a more covert agenda and motivation. As the Famine progressed, it became apparent that the government was using its information not merely to help it formulate its relief policies, but also as an opportunity to facilitate various long-desired changes within Ireland. These included population control and the consolidation of property through various means, including emigration..."

Despite the overwhelming evidence of prolonged distress caused by successive years of potato blight, the underlying philosophy of the relief efforts was that they should be kept to a minimalist level; in fact they actually decreased as the

Famine progressed." (17.)

### **BRITISH COLONIAL POLICIES**

Cecil Woodham-Smith, an Englishwoman, wrote that "It is not characteristic of the English to behave as they have behaved in Ireland." The following historical record offer contrary evidence. Briefly consider five issues: British treatment of American prisoners during the Revolution, British domination of the slave trade, British government-backed "Opium War", British concentration camps used during the Boer War, and the 1943 mass starvation in British-ruled Bengal, India.

#### **1. BRITISH STARVED AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY WAR PRISONERS**

During the American Revolution the British put captured rebel soldiers, sailors, and civilians onboard floating dungeons called "horrible hulks." According to Albert Martin in The War for Independence, "They were worse than any prison ashore."

On the worst boat, H.M.S. Jersey, nicknamed 'Hell Afloat', "Prisoners were allowed half the Royal navy's ration, and that was food rejected as too spoiled even for Her Majesty's seamen. Rats and vermin swarmed through Jersey, spreading disease."

"Although the Jersey held 1,100 prisoners with more arriving daily, overcrowding was no problem, since the dying made way for the newcomers. Each morning a Redcoat sergeant bellowed through the bars, 'Rebels, turn out your dead.' No fewer than five bodies were hoisted up each day."

The only way to get off the hulks was to change sides and enlist in the service of King George III. "British officers constantly spoke of His Majesty's generosity toward rebels who mended their ways. Yet very few accepted the offer to turn traitor. Their willingness to suffer is proof of their devotion to the cause of American independence." Over eleven thousand men died in these hulks, more than lost their lives in all of George Washington's battles..\_(18.)

#### **2. DURING THE 17TH AND EARLY 18TH CENTURY, ENGLAND WAS THE LEADING SLAVE TRADING NATION**

According to a 1980 book, The African Slave Trade, England began trading slaves in 1562 when London merchants financed "three good ships" with hundreds of men in their crews, to sail under the command of William Hawkins. In Guinea, they "got into their possession, partly by the sword and partly by other means to the number of 300 Negroes at least." (20.)

Between 1795-1804 when English slave trade was at its height, the following were the clearances for ships from the three main English ports:

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Port.	Slaves allowed by regulation	Ships
Liverpool	323,770	1,099
London	46,505	155
Bristol	10,718	29

"The value of British income derived from (slave) trade with the West Indies was said to be four times greater than the value of British incomes derived from trade with the rest of the world. And this West India trade was in many respects the ideal colonial system. The trade consisted in simple exchange of cheap manufactured goods for African slaves, of African slaves for West India foodstuffs and tobacco; and of these products, once brought to Europe, for a high return in cash." (21.)

### **3. THE BRITISH USED WARSHIPS AND TROOPS TO FORCE CHINA TO ACCEPT IMPORTED OPIUM**

According to World History From 1500 the British wanted Chinese tea, but had nothing but cash to trade for it. Their colony in India was producing a good crop of opium, but it was prohibited in China except for medical purposes. The Chinese resisted illegal British opium trafficking, and that led to the "Opium War". Britain used superior firepower, ships and troops to force the Chinese to accept opium sales. "The opium trade amounted to millions of silver dollars and hundreds of tons of opium annually." (22.)

### **4. THE BRITISH STARVED THOUSANDS IN BOER WAR CONCENTRATION CAMPS**

Fifty years after a million Irish people starved to death under British rule, the English fought their last great imperialist war. Major-General Horatio H. Kitchener commanded the British troops fighting the Dutch Boers in South Africa.

According to English author Thomas Pakenham, in his 1979 book The Boer War, Kitchener hoped to defeat the guerilla forces by destroying their means of support. He ordered the Boer farms burned and all the cattle, sheep and other livestock killed. His soldiers then rounded up all the men, women and children who were not guerilla fighters, and put them into concentration camps near railroad lines.

One hundred and fifty thousand people, white and black, were interned in camps with no running water, no meat, no milk for the children, and little fresh fruit or vegetables. Humanitarians reported that fever-stricken children-were dying in the dirt. Twenty to twenty-eight thousand people died of malnutrition and related diseases, according to Pakenham. British "methods of barbarism" in South Africa shocked the world.

### **5. WHILE UNDER BRITISH COLONIAL RULE, MILLIONS STARVED IN BENGAL,**



**INDIA**

According to Dr. Gideon Polya, a professor in Victoria, Australian, the 1943-44 famine that killed an estimated 3.5 to 5 million people in Bengal was "man-made". Dr. Polya says that "the British brought an unsympathetic and ruthless economic agenda to India" and that "the creation of famine" was brought about by British "sequestration and export of food for enhanced commercial gain."

He says that "British disinclination to respond with urgency and vigor to food deficits resulted in a succession of about 2 dozen appalling famines during the British occupation of India." These swept away tens of millions of people. One of the worst famines was that of 1770 that killed an estimated 10 million people in Bengal (one third of the population) and which was "exacerbated by the rapacity of the (British) East India Company".

Dr. Polya writes that "An extraordinary feature of the appalling record of British imperialism with respect to genocide and mass, world-wide killing of huge numbers of people (by war disease and famine) is its absence from public perception. Thus, for example, inspection of a selection of British history texts reveals that mention of the appalling Irish Famine of 1845-47 is confined in each case to several lines (although there is of course detailed discussion of the attendant, related political debate about the Corn Laws). It is hardly surprising that there should be no mention of famine in India or Bengal."

The 1998 Nobel Prize winner in economics, Indian-born Amartya Sen, was a childhood victim of the Bengal famine. He said, "Any famine is easy to prevent if a government has the incentive to prevent it. If the government generates the income, then the market can deal with the supply problem very well by moving food." Famines never strike democracies, Professor Sen contends. "Democracy gives a political incentive for the government to intervene ... elected governments feel an obligation to intercede on behalf of constituents. Autocrats feel no such compunction."

If the above historical record is true, then it is characteristic of British officials to behave as they behaved in Ireland. However, one cannot conclude that the ruthless actions of the ruling elite had the complete support of the British people.

**THE CASE FOR GENOCIDE IN IRELAND: A SUMMARY**

1. British Laws enacted over centuries, deprived the Irish of their land, language, trade, education, vote and religion.

2. British racism against the Irish people has been manifest for centuries, and has been used to dehumanize, debase, criminalize and enslave the Irish. British racism also extended to Africans, Indians, Egyptians and other conquered peoples.

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3. The British government upheld the absolute right of landlords to evict Irish families during a terrible famine even in the dead of winter. Further, the Poor Law was encouraged landlords to engage in eviction in order not to be bankrupted by poor rates for their tenants.

4. The British allowed massive amounts of food to be exported from Ireland during the Famine and justified it under the doctrine of laissez-faire, or non-interference. However, British interference in Irish trade has been prolonged and continuous, before, during, and after the Famine.

5. The British authorities were well aware that the Poor Law made landlords more likely to make a one-time payment for "coffin ship" passage for their tenants rather than continue to pay taxes for their upkeep in workhouses. Canadian officials repeatedly sent reports informing British officials of the massive mortality rates on these ships.

### QUESTIONS:

- Which historian or author provides the weakest arguments about genocide? Which the strongest? Why?
- Which, if any, of the three definitions of genocide applies to British rule in Ireland?
- Why is it important to consider the other acts of starvation imposed by the British in the historical period before and after the Famine?
- Do the actions of the British government related to the Revolutionary War prison ships, the slave trade, the Opium War, the Boer War, and the Bengal famine influence your opinion about whether or not the British were capable of genocide in Ireland?

### FOOTNOTES

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11. Ibid., p.180
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