

Irish Potato Famine

The Irish Potato Famine, also known as “the Great Hunger”, began in 1845 when a potato fungus spread rapidly throughout Ireland. The infestation ruined half of the potato crop in that year, and about 75% of the crops for the next seven years. Because the tenant farmers of Ireland (which was ruled as a colony of Great Britain) relied heavily on the potato as a source of food, the infestation had a catastrophic impact on the population. Between 1845 and 1852, approximately one million people died from starvation or related causes, and at least another million left their homeland as refugees, going to North America and Great Britain.

Ireland in the 19th Century

Ireland was governed as a colony of Great Britain from 1801 to 1919, when the Irish war of independence occurred. Together, the combined nations were called “the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland”.

At that time, most of the landowners were British politicians. Also, any Irish who practised Catholicism (the majority of Ireland’s native population) were prohibited from owning land, voting or holding an elected office. Although these laws were repealed in 1829, their impact on Ireland’s society was still being felt at the time of the Potato Famine. English and Anglo-Irish families owned most of the land, and most Irish Catholics worked as tenant farmers, forced to pay rent to the landowners.

Ironically, less than 100 years before the famine, the potato was introduced to Ireland by the British, and it soon became the main food of the poor, particularly during the cold winters.

The Great Hunger

When the crops began to fail in 1845, as a result of the fungus infection, Irish leaders in Dublin petitioned Queen Victoria and Parliament to act. In response to the petition, the British government repealed the “Corn Laws”, which had previously made corn and bread very expensive. But these changes didn’t affect the problem of the potato infection. Many farmers were unable to produce sufficient food for their own consumption, and due to the rising costs of other supplies, thousands of people died from starvation, and hundreds of thousands more from disease caused by malnutrition.

Complicating matters further, Ireland continued to export large quantities of food to Great Britain during the famine. In 1847, records show that food such as peas, beans, rabbits, fish and honey continued to be exported from Ireland, even as thousands were dying from hunger.

The potato crops fully recovered in 1852.

Legacy of the Potato Famine

The precise role of the British government in the Potato Famine is still being debated. Did it deliberately ignore the situation of Ireland’s poor people, or was their inaction and inadequate response simply political incompetence?

Tony Blair, during his time as British Prime Minister (1997-2007), issued a statement in 1997 offering a formal apology to Ireland for the British government’s handling of the crisis at the time.



Irish Famine Memorial - Dublin

Irish Hunger Memorials

Many cities have constructed memorials to commemorate the many lives lost in Ireland during the famine. For example, Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Phoenix in the United States, Montreal and Toronto in Canada, Dublin and Limerick in Ireland, Melbourne and Sydney in Australia, Liverpool in England and Cardiff in Wales.

A "Great Hunger Museum" has also been inaugurated at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut, and is an excellent resource for information on the Potato Famine and its impact on Ireland.

Source: <https://www.history.com/topics/immigration/irish-potato-famine>