



QUCEH WORKING PAPER SERIES  
<http://www.quceh.org.uk/working-papers>

FAMINE AS GENOCIDE? UKRAINE AND IRELAND

Liam Kennedy (Queen's University Belfast)

Working Paper 22-03

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR ECONOMIC HISTORY  
Queen's University Belfast  
185 Stranmillis Road  
Belfast BT9 5EE

April 2022

# Famine as Genocide? Ukraine and Ireland

Liam Kennedy

*Queen's University Belfast*

## Abstract

The Great Irish Famine, 1846-50, and the Great Ukrainian Famine, 1932-33 are searing episodes in the history of the two countries. On some estimates, the relative intensity of famine in the two societies was broadly the same, with famine conditions claiming the lives of one-in-eight of the population. But on closer examination it is the dissimilarities between the two episodes that dominate. The politics and ideology shaping reaction to the emerging catastrophes in the two societies were hugely contrasting. The intent of policy in the Irish case, however inadequate some of the relief measures, was to save lives. Suspicion of the peasantry (not only in Ukraine), the extraction of grain surpluses and the unleashing of state terror against “class enemies” took precedence over saving lives in the Soviet handling of the Ukrainian famine. Paradoxically, it is the collective memory of famine and its politicisation that brings the Irish and Ukrainian calamities into closer relationship with each other.

Keywords: Great Irish Famine (1846-50); Great Ukrainian Famine (1932-33).

JEL Classification: N43, N44, H53, N54.

Contact information: Liam Kennedy, Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK.

Email: [l.kennedy@qub.ac.uk](mailto:l.kennedy@qub.ac.uk).

## **Introduction**

Two great famines are imprinted in the national consciousness of the Irish and the Ukrainians.

<sup>1</sup> First in time is the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s; the other is the Great Ukrainian Famine of the early 1930s. Both have given rise to highly politicised readings, not least in their respective diasporas; both have played their part in ethnic formation at home and abroad; both have given rise to claims of genocide. The great Polish lawyer and émigré, Raphael Lemkin, who exercised a seminal influence on the drafting of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (approved by the United Nations in 1948) once compared the Irish famine of the 1840s to Ukraine's great famine of 1932-33.<sup>2</sup> But was he right in labelling either or both as genocides and how far should these comparisons be pushed?

Raphael Lemkin was born in 1900 on a small farm near the town of Wolkowysk, then part of imperial Russia.<sup>3</sup> His early interests focused on the need for the legal protection of ethnic, religious and social groups. His advocacy in the 1930s of such safeguards met with little success in international conferences. The German invasion of Poland caused him to flee for safety, first to Sweden and then to the United States. Forty nine members of his family, including his Jewish parents, died in concentration camps, the Warsaw ghetto and on death marches.

## **The notion of genocide**

One might expect that Lemkin's legal interest in the oppression of minority groups to have come out of Jewish experience and the long history of anti-Semitism that eventually consumed his own family. This was not, however, the catalyst. It was the massacre of Armenian Christians by the Turkish army and militias during World War 1 and subsequently that first engaged his attention.<sup>4</sup> Beginning in 1915, though there had been earlier instances of terror, the Turkish state executed selected Armenian intellectuals. Ordinary Armenians were then subjected to systematic expulsion, arbitrary killings and death marches through the Mesopotamian desert.<sup>5</sup> Approximately one million Armenians died directly or indirectly as a consequence of Turkish terror. Some historians regard this as an instance of genocide (though

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the helpful comments of Peter M. Solar, and in particular for those of Cormac Ó Gráda.

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, 21 September, 1953.

<sup>3</sup> Lemkin, *Totally Unofficial: The Autobiography of Raphael Lemkin*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Winter ed., *America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915*; Walker, *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation*.

the term had not yet been invented) and a number of countries have recognised the decimation of the Armenian population as precisely that. Indeed it is sometimes referred to as the first genocide in a century of genocides. In more recent times, however, this dismal distinction has been accorded to the Herero people of South West Africa (now Namibia) who rebelled against German colonial rule in 1904 and were defeated militarily by German colonial forces and then banished into desert areas where dehydration and starvation took a terrible toll.

German atrocities during World War 11 and his own family circumstances inevitably shifted Lemkin's gaze towards the unfolding tragedy of European Jewry. As a refugee scholar he worked for the US War Department during World War II and in 1944 published his monumental study, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. In the course of documenting Nazi atrocities he introduced and defined the term "genocide".<sup>6</sup> Crimes of barbarity" had been an earlier phrase of his as he groped towards a way of encapsulating the enormity of certain kinds of mass destruction. The outcome of his labours, and that of others, was the United Nations' Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide which was ratified at a general meeting of the assembly in December 1948.

The Convention did not mirror Lemkin's ideas exactly, which were rather more diffuse and possibly ill-focused, but his efforts were hugely influential in the drafting of the document. As he acknowledged, "wars of extermination" had marked and disfigured the historical record for millennia. The archetypal case of his time was of course the Shoah or Holocaust: the systematic destruction of six million European Jews during the Second World War at the hands of the German Nazis and their collaborators in Austria, Hungary, France, Croatia, the Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia), and Ukraine.

For the historian wishing to employ the term genocide there is the problem of how meaningful it is to project concepts from a later period in time back into earlier phases of human history. Some would worry that this is inappropriate or anachronistic. Moreover, there is no general agreement on the incidence of genocides, even for the twentieth century, which is both a well-documented century and a particularly blood-thirsty one. Still, the practice continues, and not just in relation to the Irish Famine or the Ukrainian Holodomor. It is a historiography that has to be accorded some attention.

## **The UN Convention on Genocide**

---

<sup>6</sup> This section draws heavily on Kennedy, *Unhappy the Land*, 108-112.

It may be helpful to look first at the UN Convention. Article One affirms that genocide is a crime under international law. Article Two states that “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” constitute genocide.<sup>7</sup> So, using hunger deliberately to bring about the destruction of a national, ethnic or racial group would seem to fit the definition.

This is very much the Ukrainian case as articulated by Raphael Lemkin during a demonstration in New York in 1953 to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33. Some 15,000 Ukrainian exiles gathered in Washington Square to charge the Stalinist regime in the USSR with the crime of genocide. In their view the famine was “purposely arranged by the Kremlin in order to crush Ukrainian resistance to Russian enslavement and Communism”.<sup>8</sup>

Lemkin addressed an audience of some 5,000 Ukrainians later that day and clearly viewed the terror, death and destruction visited on Ukrainian people as fitting his definition of genocide. In the report of his speech carried by the *Ukrainian Weekly* there is no reference to Ireland. But the *New York Times* carried another report that explicitly mentioned Ireland. “Prof. Rafael Lemkin, author of the United Nations Convention against genocide, said that [that?] high crime had been employed 100 years ago against the Irish.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the British state set out to use the instrument of famine as a means of destroying large segments of the Irish population back in the 1840s, just as the Soviets had done in the Ukraine in the 1930s.

How seriously should we take this indictment? There is little to suggest that the comparison with Ireland was a considered judgement on the part of Lemkin. More probably it was a throw-away remark in the heat of the moment. The likely text of his address to the Ukrainian rally came to light many years later and serves to reinforce this conclusion.<sup>10</sup> There is no mention of the Irish famine, suggesting no specialist interest in the Irish case.

Academic historians of Ireland are virtually unanimous in their view that the Great Famine in Ireland was not a case of genocide. However, some teachers, journalists, writers, ideologues and political activists, and particularly republican activists in Northern Ireland, adhere to the traditional nationalist narrative of the deliberate destruction of a people by

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>

<sup>8</sup> *Ukraine Weekly Section*, 19 September, 1953.

<sup>9</sup> *New York Times*, 21 September, 1953.

<sup>10</sup> It was found among his papers in the New York Public Library and was subsequently published by Roman Serbyn, “Lemkin on Genocide of Nations,” 123-130.

starvation, famine-related disease and neglect.<sup>11</sup> This narrative has, if anything, more traction in politicised sections of Irish America where the Great Famine is a myth of origin for some. (Inconveniently, most Catholic Irish emigrated in the decades after the calamity.<sup>12</sup>) But it was the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and the political passions re-ignited by the conflict, that exerted the main influence on more recent politicised readings of the Famine. As in the Ukrainian case, understandings of the past are powerfully shaped both by native and diasporic communities in transnational exchanges of meanings and perspectives.

### **The Irish Famine**

There was a partial failure of the potato crop, the principal source of food for the mass of the Irish people, in the autumn of 1845. The deficit was of the order of one-third or more of the normal yield. The first year of real famine came a year later following a second failure of the potato crop. This time the destruction was almost total. This mirrored but in more intense form failures of the potato crop across Europe.<sup>13</sup> Poor grain harvests compounded the problem of food supply. Inevitably, food prices soared.<sup>14</sup> The potato crop of 1847 was healthy but only a small acreage had been planted, so the food crisis deepened. The next two years witnessed further harvest failures. The problem was a mysterious new fungal disease, *phythophora infestans*, against which there was no remedy at the time. This precipitated a series of back-to-back harvest failures that extended over five years in some parts of the country and which was unprecedented when viewed in the mirror of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European history.<sup>15</sup> What we have is a devastating ecological strike that no one could have predicted, not unlike the Covid-19 pandemic that swept the world in 2020.

The Irish were unlucky by virtue of this visitation from the heavens, it might be said. Indeed it was maintained by some at the time that the potato blight was a punishment from on high, which is a trope commonly found in traditional societies to explain unexpected misfortune.<sup>16</sup> One detail from oral tradition in Ireland speaks of the potato blight as “a

---

<sup>11</sup> Coogan, *The Famine Plot*; Boyle, *United Ireland*.

<sup>12</sup> The classic account of Irish emigration to America is Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*.

<sup>13</sup> Solar, “The Potato Famine in Europe,” in *Famine 150*, ed. Ó Gráda, 113-27.

<sup>14</sup> Kennedy and Solar, *Irish Agriculture: A Price History*.

<sup>15</sup> Solar, “The Great Famine was No Ordinary Subsistence Crisis,” in *Famine: the Irish Experience*, ed. Crawford, 112–31.

<sup>16</sup> Devereux, *Theories of Famine*.

punishment for waste, a scourge sent from God because of the abuse of plenty”.<sup>17</sup> Variants of this interpretation of divine displeasure circulated at the time but as the crisis widened and deepened human agency was accorded the primary role.

The stark reality is that one million women, men and children died of famine and famine-related disease during the working out of this prolonged tragedy. A million others emigrated to Britain and North America out of a population of 8.5 million on the eve of the disaster.<sup>18</sup> So, what of the response of politicians and policy makers within the United Kingdom, of which Ireland was then a part? What of the role of central and local government bodies, of relief organisations and charitable organisations in seeking to ameliorate the mounting toll of human suffering?

We may begin by looking at the role of the UK government. The opening year of the crisis was handled well by the Tory government of Sir Robert Peel who arranged the secret importation of £100,000 of grain for distribution in the most distressed areas in the south and west of Ireland. His government fell in June 1846 in the wake of the repeal of the Corn Laws, a set of tariff barriers round the import of corn into the British and Irish markets. This momentous reform set Britain firmly on the pathway to free trade. For the Irish poor it was a positive contribution in that it encouraged the freer importation of grain. This took substantial effect in the spring of 1847 when massive shipments of American maize reached the Irish ports. By then, however, famine and disease had taken a lethal grip on the rural poor.

It is the Whig government of Lord John Russell that came into office in the summer of 1846 and remained in power for the duration of the famine that shoulders the bulk of criticism, both then and now. The criticisms are many: that food exports from Ireland were not curtailed; that the kind of relief offered – public works employing hundreds of thousands of ill-clad, malnourished workers on piece rates during the harsh winter of 1846-47 – was hardly an effective way of preserving life; that the contribution of the British Exchequer, some £10 million in all, was inadequate and miserly as it represented only a sliver of British national income; that there was much bureaucratic wrangling, delay and inefficiency in the handling of famine relief; that the soup kitchens that replaced employment schemes as the main vehicle of

---

<sup>17</sup> McHugh, “The Famine in Irish Oral Tradition,” in *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History, 1845-52*, ed. Edwards and Williams, 395.

<sup>18</sup> There are many histories of the Irish great famine. Among the best are: Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy*; Daly, *The Famine in Ireland*; Póirtéir ed., *The Great Irish Famine*; Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy and Memory*; Kinealy, *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion*; Delaney, *The Curse of Reason: The Great Irish Famine*.

relief from the spring of 1847 to the autumn of that year were only weakly effective because of the poor quality of the food rations. But the biggest criticism of all was that in late 1847 the burden of famine relief was thrown back precipitately on Ireland's poor-law unions.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, this gave landlords an incentive to evict their poorer tenants, which they did in their tens of thousands, because landlords were responsible for the land taxes of the poorer tenants. These taxes or poor rates went to support poor-law institutions, including workhouses and infirmaries, which now constituted the principal safety nets against destitution. A change to the conditions for receiving relief under the poor law system – the infamous Gregory Clause of 1847 – ordained that households holding more than a quarter acre of land were not eligible.<sup>20</sup> This rationing device for public assistance presented poorer households with an existential dilemma: should they hold on to their patches of land and risk self-provisioning on the unreliable tuber, or abandon their holdings for ever?

This page of the historical record would suggest callous disregard for Irish lives and a verdict pointing to manslaughter or worse. But it's not that simple. Other pages would bring other considerations into the reckoning. As in the Ukrainian famine, ideology mattered but in a very different way. The economic orthodoxy in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century was that of *laissez faire*, that is, to allow the “natural” economic order to operate free of state interference as far as possible. Quite the reverse of the Bolshevik vision of remodelling society through aggressive state action and centralised control.

This meant a reluctance to interfere in markets for grain and provisions, as this might prove to be productive of more evil than good in the long run. Less appreciated by policy makers was the physiological fact that there is no “long run” under conditions of famine, particularly in an economy characterised by quasi-subsistence agriculture. This ideological orientation blunted relief efforts but so also did a reluctance to spend public money. The former ruled out a temporary ban on grain exports from Ireland, the latter a well-funded policy of state-assisted emigration.<sup>21</sup>

Another aspect of the prevailing ideology has received insufficient attention. This was the emphasis on local responsibility for local poverty, irrespective of the strength of local

---

<sup>19</sup> Initially there were 130 administrative units known as poor-law unions (later increased to 163 by the end of the famine), each of which had a workhouse to cater for paupers and those unable to earn a living through their own exertions. Mitchell, *A New Genealogical Atlas of Ireland*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> For a spirited if not wholly convincing defence of Captain Gregory see Walker, “Villain, Victim or Prophet,” 579-99.

<sup>21</sup> On the merits of a temporary ban on grain exports see Bourke, “The Irish Grain Trade, 1839–48,” 156-69. On the efficacy of emigration as a relief measure see Ó Gráda and O'Rourke, “Migration as Disaster Relief,” 3-25.



economies. The mechanism in Britain and Ireland was the poor-law, supplemented by private charity. What appeared miserly in Ireland also applied to the English and Scottish localities. During the contemporaneous but less severe famine in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland the role of the Westminster government was limited, it was opposed in principle to gratuitous support for famished cottars, and it shifted responsibility for famine relief to charitable bodies and other agencies in February 1847, a half-year before doing the same in Ireland.<sup>22</sup>

The treatment of the city of Liverpool by the Westminster government is equally revealing. Liverpool was the first destination for hundreds of thousands of Irish emigrants. Understandably, these waves of impoverished humanity put enormous strain on the city authorities, the poor-law system and charitable bodies. The fact that many Famine refugees brought a virulent strain of typhus with them, the “Irish fever”, placed additional pressure on health services in Liverpool and across the north of England.<sup>23</sup> Public representatives in Liverpool desperately petitioned parliament for aid, arguing that the burden of mass immigration should be shared nationally. No such aid was forthcoming and the city was forced to support its English and Irish poor from its own resources. This policy stance helps explain if not excuse the Whig government’s dictum that Irish property should pay for Irish poverty. Nonetheless, and against the grain of ideology, state intervention in Ireland was on a major scale and was designed, however inadequately, to save lives. Central government expenditure on famine relief was of the order of £10 million (the equivalent of £1.2 billion in current prices).

Nor can one ignore the role of disease which turned out to be the main killer during the years of dearth.<sup>24</sup> Relatively few died outright from starvation, unlike for instance the victims of the siege of Stalingrad, 1942-43 or the Dutch Winter Famine of 1944-45.<sup>25</sup> But once typhus, typhoid and other infectious diseases that were endemic in Irish society got a grip on a famished rural poor, heavy mortality was inevitable.

The Whig instinct to do “justice to Ireland” might have translated into more effective action, though the beating of the Home Rule drum for Ireland and divisions among Irish M.P.s at Westminster didn’t help.<sup>26</sup> The Whig party was in a minority in parliament and vulnerable

---

<sup>22</sup> Devine, *The Great Highland Famine*, 111-27.

<sup>23</sup> Darwin, MacRaild, Gurrin and Kennedy, “‘Irish Fever’ in Britain during the Great Famine,” 270-94.

<sup>24</sup> Geary, “Famine, Fever and the Bloody Flux,” in *Great Irish Famine*, ed. Póirtéir, 74-85. It seems infectious diseases were not major killers in Ukraine in 1932-33.

<sup>25</sup> Gráda, *Famine: A Short History*, 110-115.

<sup>26</sup> On Whig attitudes to Ireland see Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 28-36.

to defections on crucial votes. Some argue this constrained the cabinet's scope for policy making.<sup>27</sup> There is no doubt some truth in this but the weightier consideration is that Charles Trevelyan, assistant secretary to the Treasury and the civil servant responsible for famine relief in Ireland and Scotland, along with his political master, Charles Wood, Chancellor of the Exchequer, were convinced of the demoralising effect of reliance on state hand-outs and determined to limit as far as possible public expenditure on famine relief. There was, in addition, a conjunctural factor that seems to have heavily influenced Treasury thinking. This was the short-lived financial panic of autumn 1847 but a fateful time in terms of famine conditions in Ireland and public policy making.<sup>28</sup> Wood and Trevelyan feared that generous expenditure on famine relief might well precipitate an even deeper and prolonged crisis in the British economy.<sup>29</sup>

More might be said either critically or favourably in relation to state handling of a massive subsistence crisis that developed into a humanitarian disaster. But evidence of malevolence in policy, designed to reduce the "Celtic population" by death and disease to a fraction of its former strength, as alleged by some contemporaries and later ideologues, is not present in the historical archives.<sup>30</sup> A key condition for an instance of genocide, or something even approaching genocide, is intentionality and that is lacking in the Irish case. Nor is such motivation reflected in terms such as the Great Hunger, the Great Famine, the Potato Famine, or (in Irish) An Gorta Mór.<sup>31</sup> In the Ukrainian case, though coined retrospectively, the appellation that has gained currency – Holodomor – implies intentionality.<sup>32</sup>

### **Ukraine and Ireland in comparative perspective**

As indicated earlier, the Ukrainian and Irish famines were searing episodes in the histories of the two societies. There are points of comparison and contrast. We may begin with the former. All famines have elements in common. The physiological and psychological ravages of hunger and malnutrition affected Ukrainians and Irish alike. The breakdown of social mores, of neighbour using violence against neighbour, of parents abandoning children or each other, of

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 288-89.

<sup>28</sup> Ward-Perkins, "The Commercial Crisis of 1847," 75-94.

<sup>29</sup> Read, "Laissez-Faire, the Irish Famine, and British Financial Crisis," 411-34

<sup>30</sup> For an early denunciation of British policy that proved to be hugely influential in terms of the traditional nationalist critique see Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*,.

<sup>31</sup> A term sometimes used by populists, though writing in English. The Great Starvation, which is occasionally used, comes closer to the meaning of Holodomor.

<sup>32</sup> Graziosi, "The Soviet 1931-33 Famines and the Ukrainian Holodomor: Is a New Interpretation Possible, and what would its Consequences be?" 98.

lapses into abnormal behaviour, are well attested to in the famine literature.<sup>33</sup> So also are instances of collective resistance to crisis which in time gives way to weakness and apathy. In a sense this does not take us very far in terms of comparative analysis as these are manifestations of hunger that are common to virtually all famines.<sup>34</sup>

Despite differences in climate, geography, location and time period, there are some more distinctive similarities between the plight of the Irish poor and the peasants of Ukraine. Both were restless “provinces” within the ambit of powerful states and crisis outcomes depended to varying degrees on the behaviour of these dominant neighbours.<sup>35</sup> This was of course much more pronounced in the Ukrainian case where the actions of the Soviet government were intrusive, coercive and cruel. But it does follow that the Soviet politburo and the parliament of the United Kingdom each bear a measure of responsibility for the catastrophic outcomes. To what extent in each case is of course controversial though there is little doubt that the Soviet burden is by far the greater.

There are some similarities between Ukraine and Ireland in that both were ethnically and linguistically diverse though the relevance of this to famine would need to be teased out carefully. In Ireland roughly a quarter of the population was of Protestant descent, was almost exclusively English-speaking, and by and large favoured the political union of Britain and Ireland. Catholics by contrast were mainly English-speaking in the east and Irish-speaking in the west. This ethno-religious majority, despite internal differences, broadly favoured some degree of political autonomy for Ireland. The Irish-speaking west of Ireland suffered disproportionately severely during the Great Famine, due to economic backwardness and poverty rather than discrimination. The Ukraine had a minority of Russian speakers, though under Soviet pressure some ethnic Ukrainians declared themselves as Russian speakers. That there was ethnic discrimination against Ukrainians during the famine, both inside Ukraine and

---

<sup>33</sup> Dirks, “Social Responses during Severe Food Shortages and Famine,” 21-44; David Arnold, *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change*, 17-19.

<sup>34</sup> Ó Gráda, *Eating People is Wrong, and Other Essays on Famine, its Past, and its Future*.

<sup>35</sup> The geopolitical parallels should not be overstated. Nor should elements of togetherness in British-Irish and Russian-Ukrainian relationships be set aside either. The neighbouring power in the case of Ireland had been England, and later Britain, for the best part of a millennium. There is a singularity and a continuity to this relationship which makes for an intense sense of otherness, perhaps further sharpened by island status. This made for a simple narrative of domination and subordination when a nationalist consciousness stirred into existence. The geopolitical fate of Ukraine was worse: it was exposed to wave after wave of invaders from multiple directions – Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Napoleonic France, Austro-Hungary, and, during the Soviet period, Nazi Germany. These foes rolled easily across its open plains and imposed highly repressive political and military occupations.

in neighbouring regions of Russia, is claimed by a number of writers. Anti-Irish prejudice was also alleged during the Irish famine.<sup>36</sup>

A number of authors have pointed out that famine is unlikely under conditions of democracy.<sup>37</sup> It could be said that neither of the two countries in question was a democracy in the fully participatory sense. The more extreme was the Soviet Union. The fate of Ukraine was determined in Moscow by small numbers of men in the Soviet politburo situated at the pinnacle of the totalitarian state. By the end of the 1920s the Soviet Union was not only a one-party state, it was increasingly in the grip of dictatorial decision making in the person of Stalin. In the United Kingdom there was representative government and an opposition but the franchise was confined to substantial male property holders. A wider franchise that included the rural and urban poor, women and men, or so the argument might run, would have ensured policies that were more sensitive to hunger conditions in Ireland. That is likely the case though significant excess mortality was inevitable in view of the sudden shock to food supplies and the endemic nature of infectious diseases in mid-nineteenth century Irish society. In the end it has to be admitted that tracing nominal similarities between these two very different power structures tends towards the superficial rather than the substantive.

In Ukraine and Ireland famine deaths were significantly higher in rural as compared to urban areas, though for different reasons. Within the Soviet Union the welfare of urban dwellers, particularly industrial workers, was given preference over peasants. In the Ukrainian cities food rationing made a difference. In Ireland there was less dependence on the potato in towns and cities and incomes proved more resilient. Deaths also varied by region and sub-region, hardly surprisingly as survival or death was the outcome of local as well as national and extra-national determinants.<sup>38</sup>

In terms of relative severity excess deaths in the two countries seem fairly close, though in the Ukrainian case it does depend on whose estimate is accepted. In Ireland some 12-15% of the population perished. In the Ukraine, according to one careful estimate, the famine claimed in the region of 13% of the population, a proportion that is very similar to that for

---

<sup>36</sup> This is discussed in Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity*.

<sup>37</sup> Sen, "Individual Freedom as a Social Commitment,"

<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1990/06/14/individual-freedom-as-a-social-commitment/>;  
Devereux, *Theories of Famine*, 6-7, 139-40.

<sup>38</sup> Rudnytskyi, Levchuk, Wolowyna, Shevchuk and Kovbasiuk, "Demography of a Man-Made Human Catastrophe," 53-80; Kennedy, Ell, Crawford and Clarkson, *Mapping the Great Irish Famine*.

Ireland.<sup>39</sup> However, another earlier exploration by French demographers comes in with an excess mortality ratio of about 8% for Ukraine, still severe but below the Irish range.<sup>40</sup>

Some important qualifications are in order. Ukrainian excess mortality was compressed into a short space of time (further disasters soon ensued). Were the comparison to be run in terms of mortality within a harvest year, then the Irish experience, in which infectious disease was the main killer, would be a fraction of the intensity of the Ukrainian death toll. There is nothing in Ireland, even allowing for differences in population, comparable to the mortality spike in the spring of 1933 in the Ukraine.<sup>41</sup>

Ideology, it might be suggested, played a role in both famines. In Ireland the influence of *laissez faire* ideology, in conjunction with more pragmatic considerations, set limits to the extent of state intervention. The economic historian, Charles Read, tends to emphasise disputes in 1847 over economic and monetary policy within the British cabinet as against doctrinal objections to state intervention *per se*.<sup>42</sup> Of course, behind the façade of such concerns might also lurk an unwillingness on the part of the Treasury in London to finance more ambitious famine relief, including state support for emigration. Still, the sheer scale of the problem and the potential burden on Britain needs to be appreciated. Ireland held a population that was one-half that of England and Wales.<sup>43</sup> Unlike earlier harvest failures in Ireland which were regional in character, the great famine was a full-blown countrywide crisis. A muddle of political economy (including stress on local responsibilities and self-reliance), pragmatic economic considerations and British self-interest guided policy.

A very different ideology, Bolshevism, was almost unbounded in its despotic dealings with Ukraine, and peasants and nomads more generally within the Soviet Union. (The contemporaneous famine in Kazakhstan, where terror was freely used, seems to have been even more lethal, relatively speaking, than the Ukrainian great famine). The fire in the belly of the Soviet leaders was Marxism-Leninism and the guiding star the goal of a communist society. To this end a crash programme of farm collectivisation was imposed on the peasantry,

---

<sup>39</sup> Rudnytskyi et al., “Demography of a Man-Made Human Catastrophe,” 70.

<sup>40</sup> Calculated from Vallin, Meslé, Adamets, and PyrozHKov, “A New Estimate of Ukrainian Population Losses during the crises of the 1930s and 1940s,” 249-64; Vallin, Meslé, Adamets, PyrozHKov, “The Crisis of the 1930s,” in *Mortality and Causes of Death in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ukraine* eds. Meslé and Vallin, 25.

<sup>41</sup> According to the estimates by Rudnytskyi et al. in “Demography of a Man-Made Human Catastrophe,” 70-71, an astonishing nine out of every ten deaths due to famine in rural Ukraine were compressed within the half-year, March to August 1933, which implicitly suggests the political and terror dimensions to the catastrophe.

<sup>42</sup> Read, “Laissez-Faire, the Irish Famine, and British Financial Crisis,” 411-34.

<sup>43</sup> Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics, 1750-1970*, 8.

beginning on a large scale in 1930. The famine of 1932-33 saw no let-up in the remodelling of the agrarian social order. It was seen by Moscow as offering an opportunity to press ahead with a radical agenda of political and agrarian reform, including eliminating “social-class enemies” and producing a country-wide rural proletariat. An intimately related objective was countering Ukrainian nationalism and other “counter-revolutionary elements.” As Comrade Stalin put it:

But it is also beyond doubt that after all, the peasant question is the basis, the quintessence, of the national question. That explains the fact that the peasantry constitutes the main army of the national movement, that there is no powerful national movement without the peasant army, nor can there be. That is what is meant when it is said that *in essence*, the national question is a peasant question.<sup>44</sup>

This giant exercise in social engineering through repression proved calamitous for the Ukrainian peasantry and people in every respect, politically, economically, socially and culturally. In Ireland the crisis was more narrowly defined in terms of livelihoods, the means of sustaining life and shifting responsibility for the burden of relief to other agencies and actors, that is, the British government, Irish politicians, landlords and the propertied strata within Irish society.

In Britain and Ireland notions of making use of the hunger crisis to create a more viable rural social order on the model of Britain - a three-tiered structure of landlords, middling-sized farmers and cash-paid labourers – certainly had its advocates. Once again, as compared to Ukraine, it has to be admitted that the urge to refashion society was held with far less intensity, commitment or cruelty. For some it was no more than grasping for a silver lining to an appalling catastrophe, as exemplified by the commissioners for the 1851 census of Ireland: “But, notwithstanding our present depopulation, we have every cause for thankfulness that years of suffering have been followed by years of prosperity.”<sup>45</sup> There is more than a touch of theodicy about this observation. It is not that famine deaths were wished for, rather that, as

---

<sup>44</sup> Stalin, *Works*, 7 (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1954), 71-72. Curiously, in that same address (p. 73), Stalin refers back to the statement in the first programme of the Russian Marxists which endorsed the “right of nations to self-determination, i.e., the right of every nationality to secede and exist as an independent state.” There was little of that thinking in evidence during the famine years, or subsequently.

<sup>45</sup> *Census of Ireland for the year 1851, part IV: General Report* (British Parliamentary Papers, 1856), xvi. The commissioners point to an increase in wealth by 1851, an increase in land under cultivation, an increase in the value of agricultural stock and crops, and a rise in literacy. This might be seen as a fatuous obituary for the famine dead.

some Christian evangelists argued, out of the evils of famine a more sustainable relationship between people and resources might be achieved. How far apologists for letting fate take its course were prepared to go is hard to say, just as it is hard to say if Stalin and his associates intended famine deaths or were simply prepared to countenance them with an eye to a future in a blood-red communist utopia, in effect trading present woes for future societal bliss.

## Differences

It has to be concluded that the case for finding similarities between the two famines is far from compelling. It is the differences that dominate. We now turn to these. To begin with the pre-famine periods in the two countries, the signals of the approach to crisis were very different. The Ukraine had suffered serious famines in 1920-21 and again in 1928-29. The latter is sometimes seen as a “dress rehearsal” for the devastating famine of 1932-33.<sup>46</sup> In Ireland there was no dress rehearsal and one has to reach back more than a century to find anything comparable to the famine of the 1840s.<sup>47</sup> (There had been episodic subsistence crises, usually regional rather than national in the 1780s, 1800-01, 1816-18, 1822, 1829-31, 1835 and 1842 but no major surges of excess mortality, nor any suggestion that they were becoming more frequent or more intense.<sup>48</sup>) That there was little expectation of an existential challenge is evidenced by the buoyancy of births and marriages in virtually every part of Ireland in the decades leading up to the Great Famine.<sup>49</sup> In the Ukraine there were ominous signs of recurring crises. Not only had there been recent famines but Soviet propaganda increasingly demonised Ukrainian nationalism, Ukrainian peasants, and the so-called kulak class. In Ireland the devastation was driven by a natural disaster that had no precedent, either in terms of severity or duration.

Famine is commonly associated with warfare and its disruptive effects on food supply. Scavenging, forced population movements, outbreaks of disease, exhaustion and death are concomitants of war and famine.<sup>50</sup> The Irish famine, as we know, took place under conditions

---

<sup>46</sup> Applebaum, *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine*, 109.

<sup>47</sup> Three great famines punctuate modern Irish history, with each calamity situated a century or so apart. These are the post-Cromwellian famine of 1649-52, the great frost of 1740-41 and the potato famine of the 1840s. See Kennedy, Miller and Gurrin, “People and Population Change,” in *Ulster Since 1600*, eds. Kennedy and Ollerenshaw, 58-59.

<sup>48</sup> On subsistence crises and poverty in pre-Famine Ireland see O'Neill, “The State, Poverty and Distress in Ireland, 1815-45,” and Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine*.

<sup>49</sup> This is evident in the baptism counts in surviving parish registers and is confirmed by the statutory population censuses. The Irish population grew from 6.8 million in 1821 to 8.2 million in 1841.

<sup>50</sup> Devereux, *Theories of Famine*, 148-61; Arnold, *Famine*, 79-80.

of peace. While not at war in the conventional sense, the Soviet state was quick to unleash lethal aggression against presumed internal enemies. This difference is fundamental: the famine in Ukraine took place not under conditions of peace and stability but against a backdrop of forced collectivisation, exiling, executions, food seizures, and widespread repression. Environmental conditions mattered but not nearly to the extent that natural conditions (an “ecological crisis”) shaped the Irish famine.

Wheatcroft has drawn attention to a severe draught in the spring of 1931 in Ukraine and heavy rain during harvesting in the following year, leading to below average harvest outcomes.<sup>51</sup> Might such random variations in harvests, which are a characteristic of all agrarian economies, not explain much of the excess mortality? In the view of Davies and Wheatcroft a “major factor in the poor harvests of 1931 and 1932 was the weather”.<sup>52</sup> However, a more recent estimate by Natalya Naumenko finds that only ten per cent or less of the variation in excess mortality across Ukraine is explicable by reference to bad weather.<sup>53</sup> This shifts the attention back to political factors, the collectivisation drive and the use of terror in extracting food surpluses from the peasantry. In her view, as much as half of the variation in excess mortality was due to Soviet policy, principally the vast experiment in collectivisation and associated grain requisitioning.<sup>54</sup>

Nor was large-scale political disruption to Ukrainian food production of recent origin. In 1918-20 Ukraine was caught up in an attempt to establish political independence and multi-sided civil war, compounded by outside interventions by Russian and Polish forces. Partisan war continued until 1923. Bolshevik suspicion of the peasantry on political and ideological grounds led to brutal repression that aggravated harvest shortages. The subsequent radical shift to collectivised agriculture meant uprooting peasants from their holdings and crushing private enterprise. Unsurprisingly, this met with peasant resistance, disruption to food production and blunted incentives to produce agricultural surpluses. Historically, the Ukraine was the great grain-producing region of the Russian empire, feeding Russian cities and grain-deficit areas as well as supplying exports to generate foreign currency.<sup>55</sup> Similarly Soviet rulers relied heavily

---

<sup>51</sup> Wheatcroft, “Eastern Europe (Russia and the USSR),” in *Famine in European History*, eds. Alfani and Ó Gráda, 230.

<sup>52</sup> Davies and Wheatcroft, *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931-33*, 439.

<sup>53</sup> Naumenko, “The Political Economy of Famine: The Ukrainian Famine of 1933.” Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3264362> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3264362>

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> A comparison with Ireland doesn’t really work, though it is true some historians speak in exaggerated terms of Ireland as the bread basket of Britain. In reality it was a useful ancillary



on grain surpluses (“grain for the socialist fatherland”) from the black-earth regions of Ukraine and elsewhere and were determined, irrespective of harvest outcomes to extract grain at great human cost. Stalinist anger at assumed peasant recalcitrance informed and motivated mass terror, wholesale seizures of grain, executions and deportations.<sup>56</sup>

To summarise this part of the argument, human agency of the malign kind looms large in the story of the Ukrainian famine. The subtitle of the historian Robert Conquest’s major work incorporates the phrase “terror-famine” which captures the dual aspect of the catastrophe.<sup>57</sup> State terror was deployed in a manner that has no obvious comparison with Ireland. A strained Marxist interpretation might be that the obverse of this was allowing free rein to market forces in Ireland, including large-scale evictions, to complete the expropriation of the smallholdings of the rural poor.<sup>58</sup> However, the degree of force involved in the two cases is incommensurable. In Ireland there were alternatives, albeit of dubious efficacy for Irish cottiers and labourers in remote locations, in the form of public works’ schemes, the short-lived soup kitchens, the expanding workhouses and fever hospitals, and out-migration.<sup>59</sup>

The absolute numbers who died during the Ukrainian famine greatly exceeded the death toll in Ireland. In Ireland excess mortality was in the region of one million. Mokyr’s sophisticated pioneering work produces a lower-bound estimate of 1.1 million and an upper-bound of 1.5 million.<sup>60</sup> He sees the former “as much closer to the truth”, presumably because averted births (the fertility deficit) are included in his upper-bound estimates.<sup>61</sup> There is little controversy round the Irish estimates nowadays.<sup>62</sup> The great historian of famines, including

---

supplier of wheat and oats, and there were alternative international suppliers. The average of Irish grain exports for the period 1841-45 would have fed fewer than 2 million people, from a population of 20 million. Calculated from P.M.A. Bourke, “The Irish Grain Trade, 1839-48,” 166-8.

<sup>56</sup> Applebaum, *Red Famine*, 191-208.

<sup>57</sup> Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivisation and the Terror-Famine*.

<sup>58</sup> On Irish famine evictions see Donnelly, Jr, *The Great Irish Potato Famine*.

<sup>59</sup> For overviews see Kinealy, “The Role of the Poor Law during the Famine,” and Daly, “The Operation of Famine Relief, 1845-57,” in *Great Irish Famine* ed. Póirtéir, 104-22 and 123-34 respectively.

<sup>60</sup> Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved*, 265-77.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 277. That is, he suggests, if the birth and death regimes during the Irish famine were comparable to those of the Finnish famine in 1866-68.

<sup>62</sup> A qualification is in order: this is within the academy nowadays. As in the Ukraine, politicised claims of a much higher mortality during the Irish famine have featured in polemical writings, past, present and no doubt future. Earlier guess-estimates by Irish historians, tilting against populist tendencies, tended to downplay famine mortality and erred in the other direction.

the Irish famine, Cormac Ó Gráda, has produced independently an excess mortality figure of about one million.<sup>63</sup>

Politicised claims from the 1950s, as published in the *Ukrainian Weekly Section* (New York), put the number of deaths during the 1932-33 famine, including mass executions and deportations, at more than ten million (out of a population of about 31 million).<sup>64</sup> Writing in the 1980s Robert Conquest calculated the number of deaths in the Ukraine at more than five million.<sup>65</sup> With the opening of many but not all Soviet archives in the wake of *perestroika*, new estimates emerged. Rudnysskyi and colleagues, writing in the *Canadian Journal of Population* in 2015, published a carefully-constructed estimate of direct deaths due to famine of 3.9 million Ukrainians.<sup>66</sup> The joint authors also calculated averted births at 0.6 million. This set of conclusions is endorsed by Applebaum who states, perhaps prematurely, that “agreement is now coalescing” around these two numbers.<sup>67</sup> Earlier, alternative estimates by a team of French-led demographers stand in opposition. Vallin *et al.* have come up with a much lower death toll of 2.6 million (and averted births of one million).<sup>68</sup> No doubt the debate will run and run, both because of the political passions the subject arouses and because of uncertainty round some key demographic variables. For instance, voluntary net outmigration in 1932 and 1933 is particularly difficult to estimate and will never be known for certain. This matters crucially because the larger the number of out-migrants estimated (or assumed), the smaller the scope for famine mortality, and vice versa. So, at present the range of estimates for Ukrainian famine mortality, at least those based on demographic data, extends widely from 2.6 to 5 million. It need hardly be underlined that even the lower limit indicates an appalling level of suffering within Ukraine.

When considering the demography of the two famines it is worth making a distinction between the direct effects of famine and the indirect effects. The former is excess mortality, those who died during the period of the famine as a result of famine and famine-related illnesses. The death toll is relatively well established in the Irish case (see the earlier

---

<sup>63</sup> Ó Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine*, 104.

<sup>64</sup> *Ukrainian Weekly Section*, 19 September 1953. It charged the Soviet regime with a “genocidal act”. On the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the great famine in 2008, the President of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko, went so far as to claim ten million victims of the famine and Stalinist terror. See website of the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain:

<https://www.augb.co.uk/president-yushchenko-speeches.php>

<sup>65</sup> Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow*, 303-306. Davies and Wheatcroft, *The Years of Hunger*, 415, have a range of 4.6 to 5.7 million excess deaths due to famine for all of the USSR for 1930-33.

<sup>66</sup> Rudnysskyi et al, “Demography of a Man-Made Human Catastrophe,” 53-89.

<sup>67</sup> Applebaum, *Red Famine*, 285.

<sup>68</sup> Vallin et al., “A New Estimate of Ukrainian Population Losses,” 249-64.

discussion). In Ukraine those hastened to death by virtue of political persecution and those executed constitute something of a grey area. Soviet repression in Ukraine was continuous but varying in intensity through time, and during the famine period operated in complex interrelationship with the collectivisation drive, grain seizures and the famine itself. In principle the repression effect is separate but in practice impossible to disentangle. Under conditions of intensified repression (1932-33), and compounding this with hunger effects, means that the direction of bias is to overestimate the purely famine mortality, at least as normally understood. Not that this distinction would have meant much to the victims, it has to be said.

The indirect effects relate to the prevention of births due to hunger, disease, death, dislocation and other famine effects. In other words, the gap between actual births during the famine and those that would have taken place in normal times in the absence of famine. Admittedly it is something of a stretch to conceive of “normal” times in Ukraine, even in relation to demographic behaviour, in the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution, civil war and intermittent famines in the run up to 1933. Still, the exercise of comparing the indirect effects in the two societies is worth attempting, not least because the results turn out to be so strikingly different. The contrast may give rise to some further lines of inquiry.

Using Mokyr’s data for Ireland we find that indirect deaths were roughly the equivalent of 40% (38.5% to be precise) of direct famine deaths. The corresponding figure for the Ukraine, if we use the data generated by Rudnysskyi *et al.*, is much lower at 15.4%. The explanation might be that prolonged famine in Ireland had the effect of depressing *both* nuptiality and fertility over many years, thus one might expect the indirect effects to bulk relatively larger in the Irish case.<sup>69</sup> A sample of Roman Catholic parish registers examined by the writer for the 1840s lends support to this supposition: hardly surprisingly, the incidence of marriage collapsed in badly-affected areas during the prolonged Irish famine.<sup>70</sup>

What of population movements set in motion by hunger, which is a concomitant of most famines? Escape hatches were limited in the Ukrainian case by comparison with Ireland where a million or more, out of a population of 8.5 million on the eve of the famine,

---

<sup>69</sup> Perhaps it is possible to see the relationship between averted births and excess deaths as an improvised test of the plausibility of the alternative estimates produced by Vallin *et al.* They have excess deaths at 2.6 million and averted births at 1million. The result turns out to be identical with that for Ireland, coming in at 38.5%. Intuitively at least, this seems high in view of the length of the Irish famine and the consequent scope for a marked decline in nuptiality, and hence potential births.

<sup>70</sup> Data from two dozen parish registers (marriage records) for the 1830s-1850s. The official registration of births, marriages and deaths was not instituted in Ireland until 1864.

emigrated.<sup>71</sup> Many other millions followed. Some of course died on board ship or soon after arrival in Britain or North America but for most it was a viable, albeit a physically and emotionally painful survival strategy.<sup>72</sup> It also offered the possibility of betterment.

There were population movements within and beyond Ukraine, though of a rather different kind to those in Ireland. Some rural dwellers, despairing of a future under collectivised agriculture or simply fleeing famine, moved to towns and cities. Despite restrictions – internal passport controls were introduced in 1932 – numbers of men migrated to Donbas coal-mining regions where there was a growing demand for labour.<sup>73</sup> Others crossed illegally into Russia. Some were apprehended, repatriated or incarcerated in the emerging gulags in northern Russia. In another variant on migration, gulags within Ukraine held large numbers of “enemies within”. There were massive forced population movements to Siberia and other remote areas. But in terms of *voluntary* migration, which might be compared with the Irish case, Vallin et al., put net outward migration of the voluntary kind for the 1930s “as around zero”.<sup>74</sup> In short, there is no comparison.

What also stands out as perverse in terms of general famine history is the socio-economic status of the victims in the Ukraine.<sup>75</sup> Unlike most famines, it was the better-off sections of society that were targeted. Kulaks, or so-called prosperous peasants (though in practice the term turned out to be highly elastic), suffered most as these were stigmatised as “class enemies” and “counter revolutionaries” by the Soviet authorities and their Ukrainian collaborators, and so endured disproportionate despoliation and death. In Ireland the more typical relationship between famine vulnerability and poverty was borne out. Cottiers and labourers suffered the most. Some landlords went bankrupt but, outside of satirical asides, there are no reports of any starving to death.

It is noteworthy that the Ukrainian great famine was short-lived by comparison with the Irish famine. As mentioned earlier, it is extraordinary in the European historical experience for harvest failures, as in Ireland, to run on, year after year, without respite and it does raise the question how other nineteenth-century societies might have fared if subjected to such prolonged stress.<sup>76</sup> In other words, and in some respects, the Irish famine was *sui generis*. If

---

<sup>71</sup> Ó Gráda and O’Rourke, “Migration as Disaster Relief,” 3-25.

<sup>72</sup> On mortality estimates for the long transatlantic voyage to North America see Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved*, 266-68.

<sup>73</sup> Applebaum, *Red Famine*, 132.

<sup>74</sup> Vallin, Meslé et al, “Ukrainian Population Losses,” 252.

<sup>75</sup> Devereux, *Theories of Famine*, 53-62.

<sup>76</sup> Solar, “No Ordinary Subsistence Crisis,” 112–31.

the poor harvests and famine years in Finland in 1866-68, for instance, had continued for a few more years one might anticipate a lethal outcome not unlike the fate of Iceland in 1783-84 when famine and plague destroyed more than a fifth of the population.<sup>77</sup> Two opposing questions follow from the Irish case. One, why did so many die? The other, how was mortality contained within the limits that obtained historically?

One final set of differences is worth highlighting. The famine in the Ukraine was not acknowledged as a famine. For political reasons, the Soviet authorities deliberately suppressed any discussion of the existence of a famine.<sup>78</sup> Worse still, it rebuffed foreign food aid lest this tarnish the success story of economic planning and the advances being claimed for the Soviet model of economic development. By contrast with this state-imposed amnesia, the Irish famine was widely reported in newspapers and visitors' accounts, debated in parliament and at public meetings in Ireland and gained international publicity.<sup>79</sup> Aid flowed, albeit in limited amounts, from many parts of the world.<sup>80</sup> There was obfuscation at times, as in parliamentary debates on the scale of mortality. The "Death Census" initiated by John O'Connell and the Repeal Association in 1847, which attempted to count the number of famine victims, received a poor hearing in the English press.<sup>81</sup> But suppression of knowledge of the awful events was neither attempted nor possible.

### **Aftermath: the Politics of Remembrance**

While the picture that is emerging is that the experience of the two famines is different in virtually all important respects, paradoxically perhaps, there are similarities in the subsequent recall and memorialising of the two calamities. Each has given rise to highly politicised readings. Each has left an enduring imprint on the Ukrainian and the Irish diasporas respectively.<sup>82</sup> Both famines contributed to the making of ethnic solidarity abroad and nation building at home, though the latter is far more pronounced in the Ukrainian case. The Ukrainian

---

<sup>77</sup> Daniel E. Vasey, "Population, Agriculture, and Famine," *Human Ecology* 19, no.3 (1991): 343-44.

<sup>78</sup> Applebaum, *Red Famine*, 302-25.

<sup>79</sup> Delaney, *The Curse of Reason*, *passim*.

<sup>80</sup> Christine Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland*.

<sup>81</sup> Darwen, MacRaid, Gurrin and Kennedy, "The Death Census of Black 1847," annual conference of the Canadian Association for Irish Studies, Londonderry, June 2017.

<sup>82</sup> The current president of the United States, Joe Biden, has a strong sense of Irish identity and recalls that his great-great-great-grandfather, Edward Blewitt, emigrated from the West of Ireland to the United States towards the end of the famine. Most Irish Americans are not descended from Famine emigrants, though this is a widespread misconception. Liam Kennedy, "The Hunger Games: Bad History and Biden's Irish Roots," *Spectator* (23 January 2021).

parliament has returned a verdict of genocide on the former Soviet Union on the grounds that the Stalinist regime set out deliberately to destroy Ukrainian intellectuals and peasants. Ukrainian activists have persuaded a number of other assemblies to follow suit (including the United States, Poland and Latvia). The legacy of Raphael Lemkin lives on. Not to be outdone, Irish American activists have succeeded in placing the Irish famine alongside the Jewish Holocaust on the school curriculum in some American states.<sup>83</sup> But it is fair to say the genocidal interpretation of the Irish famine enjoys little support in Ireland outside of ultra-nationalist circles.

Whether the Ukrainian great famine meets the criteria for genocide is an important judgement-call for many commentators; for others it may be a somewhat sterile consideration. Some are sceptical of the value of exporting later conceptualisations, particularly legalistic formulations, backwards in time. But of the primary realities there is little room for disagreement. Soviet rulers of the 1930s were responsible for and guilty of mass executions, of appalling cruelty in dispossessing peasants of their landholdings, of forcible seizures of grain and other foodstuffs in the face of widespread hunger, of exiling millions to other parts of the Soviet Union, of imposing brutal conditions in the gulags within and beyond Ukraine. It also tried to destroy memory, with the aim of covering up its “high crimes”. In the longer term, that proved to be the less successful part of the onslaught.

## **Conclusion**

The really big difference between Ukraine and Ireland is that the thrust of policy in the Irish case was to save lives, even if the measures were parsimonious, sometimes poorly targeted or, more importantly, not maintained across the full span of the famine. The handling of the Irish famine by British and Irish politicians and property holders can be criticised on many grounds, as we saw earlier, but an intention to starve hundreds of thousands of the rural poor is not one of them.

Culpable neglect on an extensive scale may have a degree of plausibility but even this less severe verdict has to contend with the scale of relief operations – three million on outdoor relief rations during the early summer of 1847 when it was presumed the next harvest would bring good news – and a mistaken faith in the doctrines of political economy. The notion of local responsibility for local poverty, while unrealistic in relation to the West of Ireland in particular, was deeply engrained in official thinking and policy making, not just in relation to

---

<sup>83</sup> Kennedy, *Unhappy the Land*, 105-8.

Ireland but throughout the United Kingdom. This formed part of economic orthodoxy and has not perhaps received the attention it deserves. The weak position in parliament of the Whig-Liberal government of Lord John Russell and the economic and financial shocks to the British economy in 1847 also need to be brought into the reckoning, as do behaviours such as “donor fatigue” when a social crisis seems to run on indefinitely.

Debates round the allocation of responsibility are not easily resolved. Traditional nationalist narratives have apportioned blame almost exclusively along British-Irish lines. But not only the state and its officials bear responsibility for the calamity. Class differences within Irish society, by contrast with Ukraine, favoured the strong, so a degree of culpability attaches to commercial farmers who cut loose their labourers or swallowed up the holdings of cottiers and small farmers. The Irish middle classes have been singled out for sometimes callous indifference, including “a glaring deficit of compassion”.<sup>84</sup> A similar point might be made about Irish landlords, particularly those who enforced mass clearances, though in populist accounts these are seen as little more than appendages to the British state in Ireland. Nor should we overlook the failures of Irish political representatives for whom famine was not necessarily the most important concern.<sup>85</sup>

In the case of Ukraine it is difficult to summon up many mitigating considerations. It is true some relief supplies were directed by the Soviet authorities to famine-stricken areas, mainly towards the end of the famine in 1933. But these were on a tiny scale relative to the size of the problem. State policy was largely instrumental in forcing acute shortages of grain and other foodstuffs upon a society endowed with rich agricultural resources. The deliberate destruction of evidence of the famine and the enforced silence round it suggests the terror dimensions to the famine. The archivist Hennadii Boriak, records: “in *Ukraine not a single archival document* about the Famine was published until the end of the 1980s”.<sup>86</sup> Nowadays a surfeit of archival materials challenges the researcher, which is an extraordinary reversal. On the emotive issue of genocide the words of Anne Applebaum seem apposite:

---

<sup>84</sup> Delaney, ““There but for the Grace of God Go I”: Middle-Class Catholic Responses to Ireland’s Great Famine,” *English Historical Review*, 135, no. 577 (2020), 1433-1460.

<sup>85</sup> Daly, *Famine in Ireland*, 68.

<sup>86</sup> Boriak, “Sources and Resources on the Famine in Ukraine’s State Archival System,” 118.

The accumulation of evidence means that it matters less, nowadays, whether the 1932-3 famine is called a genocide, a crime against humanity, or simply an act of mass terror. Whatever the definition, it was a horrific assault, carried out by a government against its own people.<sup>87</sup>

In terms of the Ukraine-Ireland comparison the conclusion seems inescapable. Some similarities notwithstanding, in all important respects – those of politics and ideology, the relief measures, the possibilities of out-migration, the use of state terror, the public recognition of a crisis – the two famines are incommensurable.

### Bibliography

- Applebaum, Anne. *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine*. London, Penguin, 2017.
- Arnold, David. *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1988.
- Bew, Paul. *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity, 1789-2006*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Boriak, Hennadii. "Sources and Resources on the Famine in Ukraine's State Archival System," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, no.s 1-4, 27 (2004-2005): 117-147.
- Bourke, P. M. A. "The Irish Grain Trade, 1839-48," *Irish Historical Studies* 20 (1976): 156-69.
- Boyle, Francis A. *United Ireland, Human Rights, and International Law*. Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2013.
- Census of Ireland for the year 1851, part IV: General Report*. British Parliamentary Papers, 1856.
- Coogan, Tim Pat. *The Famine Plot: England's Role in Ireland's Greatest Tragedy*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Conquest, Robert. *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivisation and the Terror-Famine*. London, Arrow Books, 1988.
- Daly, Mary E. *The Famine in Ireland*. Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1986.
- Idem "The Operation of Famine Relief, 1845-57," In *Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Póirtéir, 123-34. Cork: Mercier Press, 1995.

---

<sup>87</sup> Applebaum, *Red Famine*, 362. Graziosi offers a more subtle version of the genocide thesis compared to those who assume Stalin willed the destruction of the Ukrainian peasants from the outset because of their resistance to collectivisation. The author's argument is that famine was not the original policy aim (which presumably would have been counterproductive for producing grain surpluses) but from the autumn of 1932 Stalin was prepared to take advantage of the developing famine, and in effect to use it as an instrument of terror to break peasant resistance. Graziosi, "The Soviet 1931-1933 Famines and the Ukrainian Holodomor," 103-106.



- Darwen, Lewis, Donald M. MacRaild, Brian Gurrin, and Liam Kennedy. "'Irish Fever' in Britain during the Great Famine: Immigration, Disease and the Legacy of 'Black'47,'" *Irish Historical Studies* 44, no. 166 (November 2020): 270-94.
- Darwen, Lewis and Liam Kennedy, "The Death Census of Black 1847," Annual conference of the Canadian Association for Irish Studies, Londonderry, June 2017.
- Davies, R.D. and Stephen G. Wheatcroft, *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931-1933*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Delaney, Enda. *The Curse of Reason: The Great Irish Famine*. Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 2012.
- Idem, "'There but for the Grace of God Go I': Middle-Class Catholic Responses to Ireland's Great Famine," *English Historical Review*, 135, no. 577 (2020), 1433-1460.
- Devereux, Stephen. *Theories of Famine*. Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.
- Devine, T. M. *The Great Highland Famine*. Edinburgh, John Donald, 1988.
- Dirks, Robert. "Social Responses during Severe Food Shortages and Famine," *Current Anthropology* 21 (February 1980): 21-44.
- Donnelly, Jr, J.S. *The Great Irish Potato Famine*. Stroud, Sutton Publishing, 2001.
- Geary, Laurence M. "Famine, Fever and the Bloody Flux," In *Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Póirtéir, 74-85. Cork, Mercier Press: 1995.
- Gray, Peter. *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society*. Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 1999.
- Graziozi, Andrea. "The Soviet 1931-1933 Famines and the Ukrainian Holodomor: Is a New Interpretation Possible, and What Would Its Consequences Be?" *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, nos 1-4, 27 (2004-2005):117-147.
- Kennedy, Liam, Paul Ell, E.M. Crawford, and L. A. Clarkson. *Mapping the Great Irish Famine*. Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1999.
- Kennedy, Liam and Peter M. Solar. *Irish Agriculture: A Price History*. Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 2007.
- Kennedy, Liam, Kerby A. Miller, and Brian Gurrin. "People and Population Change, 1600-1914," In *Ulster Since 1600: Politics, Economy and Society* eds. Liam Kennedy and Philip Ollerenshaw, 51-4068-73. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Kennedy, Liam. *Unhappy the Land: The Most Oppressed People Ever, the Irish?* Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2016.
- Idem, "The Hunger Games: Bad History and Biden's Irish Roots," *Spectator* (23 January 2021).

- Kinealy, Christine. "The Role of the Poor Law during the Famine," In *Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Póirtéir, 104-22. Cork, Mercier Press, 1995.
- Idem, *The Great Irish Famine: Impact, Ideology and Rebellion*. London, Palgrave, 2001.
- Idem, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland: The Kindness of Strangers*. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Lemkin, Raphael. *Totally Unofficial: The Autobiography of Raphael Lemkin*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013.
- McHugh, Roger J. "The Famine in Irish Oral Tradition," In *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History, 1845-52*, eds. R.D. Edwards and T.D. Williams, 391-406. Dublin, Lilliput Press, 199.
- Miller, Kerby A. *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985.
- Mitchell, B. R. *European Historical Statistics, 1750-1970*. London, Macmillan, 1978.
- Idem, *A New Genealogical Atlas of Ireland*. Baltimore, Genealogical Publishing Company, 2002.
- Mitchel, John. *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*. Glasgow, Cameron & Ferguson, 1892.
- Mokyr, Joel. *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850*. London, Allen & Unwin, 1985.
- Naumenko, Natalya. "The Political Economy of Famine: The Ukrainian Famine of 1933," *Journal of Economic History* (Forthcoming March 2021).
- Ó Gráda, Cormac. *The Great Irish Famine*. London, Macmillan, 1989.
- Idem, *Ireland Before and After the Famine*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993.
- Idem, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy and Memory*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Idem, *Famine: A Short History*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Idem, *Eating People is Wrong, and Other Essays on Famine, its Past, and its Future*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Ó Gráda, Cormac, and Kevin O'Rourke. "Migration as Disaster Relief: Lessons from the Great Irish Famine," *European Review of Economic History* 1 (2006): 3-25.
- O'Neill, Timothy P. "The State, Poverty and Distress in Ireland, 1815-45." Ph.D. thesis, University College Dublin, 1971.
- Póirtéir, Cathal, ed. *The Great Irish Famine*. Cork, Mercier Press, 1995.
- Read, Charles. "Laissez-Faire, the Irish Famine, and British Financial Crisis," *Economic History Review* 69 (May, 2016): 411-34.

- Rudnytskyi, Omelian, Nataliia Levchuk, Oleh Wolowyna, Pavlo Shevchuk, and Alla Kovbasiuk. "Demography of a Man-Made Human Catastrophe: the case of massive famine in Ukraine 1932-1933," *Canadian Studies in Population* 42, no. 1-2 (2015), 53-80.
- Sen, Amartya. "Individual Freedom as a Social Commitment." *New York Review* 14 June 1990. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1990/06/14/individual-freedom-as-a-social-commitment/>
- Serbyn, Roman. "Lemkin on Genocide of Nations," *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 7 (2009): 123-130.
- Solar, Peter M. "The Great Famine was No Ordinary Subsistence Crisis," In *Famine: the Irish Experience*, ed. E.M. Crawford, 112–31. Edinburgh, J. Donald Publishers, 1989.
- Idem, "The Potato Famine in Europe." In *Famine 150*, edited by Cormac Ó Gráda, 113-27. Dublin, Teagasc, 1997.
- Stalin, J.V., *Works*, vol. 7. London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1954.
- Vallin, Jacques, France Meslé, Sergei Adamets, and Serhii Pyrozhkov. "A New Estimate of Ukrainian Population Losses during the crises of the 1930s and 1940s" *Population Studies* 56, no. 3 (2002): 249-64.
- Idem, "The Crisis of the 1930s." In *Mortality and Causes of Death in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ukraine* eds. F. Meslé and J. Vallin, 13-37. London, Springer, 2012.
- Vasey, Daniel E. "Population, Agriculture, and Famine: Iceland, 1784-1785," *Human Ecology* 19, no. 3 (1991): 343-44.
- Walker, Brian M. "Villain, Victim or Prophet: William Gregory and the Great Irish Famine," *Irish Historical Studies* 38 (November 2013): 579-99.
- Walker, Christopher J. *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation*. London, Routledge, 1990.
- Ward-Perkins, C.N. "The Commercial Crisis of 1847," *Oxford Economic Papers* 2, no. 1 (January 1950): 75-94.
- Wheatcroft, Stephen. "Eastern Europe (Russia and the USSR)," In *Famine in European History*, eds. Guido Alfani and Cormac Ó Gráda, 212-39. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Winter, Jay, ed. *America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.