

Famine as an Instrument of Empire: Demographic Violence in Kazakhstan, Ireland, and India

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ABSTRACT:

This article presents a comparative analysis of three catastrophic famines in agrarian societies -- Kazakhstan (1931-1933), Ireland (1845-1852), and Bengal (1943) - examining famine not merely as a humanitarian crisis but as a strategic instrument of imperial demographic engineering.

Drawing on archival documents, census data, and recent historiography, the study identifies recurring political and economic mechanisms linking food scarcity to mass mortality, forced migration, and ethnic restructuring. Special emphasis is placed on cultural memory, diaspora formation, and the long-term consequences for national identities.

The article contributes to global famine studies by framing famine as a transnational, state-managed tool of population control and political domination.

Keywords: Agrarian Societies, Famine, Demography, Collectivization, Famine Policy, Structural Violence.

Introduction

Mass famines in agrarian societies constitute not only humanitarian catastrophes but also acute manifestations of broader political and economic processes. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they arose not from an absolute absence of resources but within contexts of imperial reform, forced collectivization, colonial

modernization, and state-directed grain export. They were the product of decisions made at the highest levels of political power and affected the lives of millions of people.

This study focuses on three major famines that unfolded within agrarian societies during periods of crisis transformation: Soviet Kazakhstan (1931-1933), colonial Ireland (1845-1852), and

British Bengal (1943). Despite their temporal and geographical separation, these tragedies exhibit striking structural similarities: the systematic export of food from famine-stricken regions, the suppression of local autonomy, the erasure of traditional ways of life, and massive demographic losses.

Today, as questions of migration, food security, and postcolonial trauma once again occupy the center of global debate, a comparative examination of these three cases offers a deeper understanding of how empires managed life and death through the control of food. Analyzing these events invites a reconsideration of the categories of "natural" and "artificial" in famine, and reveals the biopolitical logic behind what might otherwise appear to be inevitable disasters.

The study is grounded in a comparative methodology and draws upon a substantial archival base, including census records, emigration registers, and political documents. For the first time within a single study, the demographic consequences of three major famines are examined together within the framework of transnational history. Particular attention is given to cultural memory, migration outcomes, and the ethno-demographic shifts that determined the fate of peoples for generations.

Relevance of the Study

The contemporary political and humanitarian agenda increasingly returns to the subject of famine -- both in the context of food security and in the context of historical memory and accountability. In the twenty-first century, as the world again confronts mass forced displacement, crises of resource distribution, and disasters arising from political mismanagement, understanding the historical experience of famine has become especially important.

Comparative studies of the Irish, Kazakh, and Bengal famines are significant not only for clarifying their demographic impacts, but also as a means of identifying the universal political mechanisms through which food is transformed into an instrument of power. Furthermore, understanding the cultural memory and collective identities formed through trauma has direct

implications for understanding contemporary diaspora communities, national narratives, and the global politics of historical recognition.

Literature Review

The subject of famine has long attracted the attention of historians, demographers, and scholars of memory. Classic works by Dreze and Sen (1989), O Grada (2009), and Davis (2000) established foundational frameworks for interpreting famine as a socio-economic and political phenomenon. The scholarship of Cameron (2018), Mukerjee (2010), and Pianciola (2001; 2004) deepened the understanding of famines within the Soviet and British empires, focusing on the institutional role of the state in escalating and sustaining food crises.

Historiography on Ireland foregrounds the role of imperialist economic policy and inequitable resource distribution (Kelleher, Moore, Fay), while scholarship on India emphasizes the strategic militarization of food supply chains during the Second World War. Of particular importance for the study of Kazakhstan are the most recent archival publications and the research of Sarah Cameron, whose work first systematically examined the specific character of nomadic society in the context of Soviet collectivization policy.

Identifying a Research Gap

Despite vigorous development of individual case studies, the historiographical literature lacks a comprehensive comparative analysis of three major famines in nineteenth- and twentieth-century agrarian societies, considered as events embedded within transnational mechanisms of imperial governance. It has not yet been fully explored how famine becomes not only a catastrophe but also an instrument of demographic policy, a catalyst for diaspora formation, and a foundation for collective cultural memory.

The present article addresses this gap by offering a comparative examination of the Kazakh, Irish, and Indian famines as forms of politically determined demographic shock, embedded in the logics of state and imperial power. It also

provides the first comprehensive examination of the identity and cultural dimensions of these famines within a transnational context.

Scientific Novelty

This article offers the first systematic comparative analysis of three major famines in nineteenth- and twentieth-century agrarian societies - Kazakhstan (1931-1933), Ireland (1845-1852), and Bengal (1943) - within the interconnected contexts of imperial policy, demographic transformation, and the formation of cultural memory. Unlike most existing studies, which focus primarily on a single regional case, the present work examines these events as interrelated instances of structural violence aimed at subordinating and reshaping peripheral communities within larger political systems- the Soviet Union and the British Empire respectively.

The scientific novelty of the work is expressed in the following contributions. First, the comparative approach: for the first time, a single study examines three historically and geographically distant episodes of mass famine in order to identify common mechanisms of political and demographic control. Second, the study conceptualizes the "politics of hunger" as a strategic instrument in the imperial governance of agrarian societies, with emphasis on the deliberate tolerance of catastrophe rather than its accidental occurrence. Third, it introduces the category of "demographic design," examining how mass famine altered the ethnic composition, migration patterns, fertility rates, and family structures of affected populations. Fourth, it analyzes cultural memory and identity formation, demonstrating how the traumatic experience of famine became the basis of national narrative and collective consciousness among Kazakhs, Irish, and Indians. Fifth, the study draws upon a wide range of archival and visual sources - including telegrams, official reports, statistical records, and eyewitness accounts - a significant portion of which have not previously been examined in a comparative context.

Taken together, the work offers a new interpretation of famine - not only as a humanitarian catastrophe, but as an

institutionalized mechanism of social transformation, controlled through food policy, demographic management, and political coercion.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this paper is to identify the common patterns and political mechanisms underlying three major famines in agrarian societies (Kazakhstan, Ireland, and Bengal), and to analyze their demographic, political, and cultural consequences within a transnational comparative framework.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the character of collectivization and export policy in the Soviet Union in Kazakhstan as a primary factor in the demographic collapse of 1931-1933.
2. To examine the Irish Great Famine (1845-1852) as a form of structural violence by the British Empire and to assess its impact on global migration.
3. To examine the Bengal famine of 1943 as a consequence of colonial food policy, exacerbated by the military imperatives of the Second World War.
4. To compare the mechanisms of political control through food across different imperial regimes.
5. To identify the demographic consequences of the famines under examination: mortality rates, changes in birth rates, internal and external migration flows, and ethno-social transformations.
6. To analyze how the memory of famine shaped cultural identity and political consciousness within the respective national communities.
7. To contribute to the development of the theory of biopolitics and demographic governance in the context of world history.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This study adopts a transnational and comparative approach, enabling the examination of famine not as a local exception but as a structural element of world history, embedded in

imperial, demographic, and economic processes. This approach reflects the broader mission of global and world history scholarship, which emphasizes the importance of cross-cutting processes in the transformation of societies across time and geography.

To achieve the objectives of the study, the following source types were employed: national censuses of the Kazakh SSR (1926, 1939), Ireland (1841, 1851, 1911, 1926), and British India (1931, 1941, 1951); emigration registers and passenger lists, including the Irish Famine Passenger Files (1846-1851) and records from British, Canadian, American, and Australian immigration services; colonial and state reports, including materials of the Bengal Famine Commission (1943-1945), Soviet party telegrams and regional body reports, and reports of colonial governors and commissioners; and international statistical data from the League of Nations and the United Nations relating to migration, food supply, and demographic change.

From a methodological standpoint, the study combines quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. The quantitative approach encompasses demographic analysis of mortality, birth rates, and migration; ethno-demographic statistics; the construction of time series; and the comparison of population change dynamics. The qualitative approach involves the interpretation of archival materials, critical reading of political and colonial documents, discourse analysis of official statements and press reports, and engagement with visual sources including photographs and maps. This interdisciplinary combination enables the study to establish not only the scale of demographic transformations but also the political and institutional mechanisms through which famine was converted into a controlled instrument of governance.

Kazakhstan, 1930-1933: Collectivization as an Instrument of Soviet Export-Oriented Policy

In the early 1930s, Kazakhstan became the epicenter of one of the most devastating humanitarian catastrophes in the history of the Soviet Union - a famine caused by forced collectivization. Unlike other regions of the

USSR, where settled agriculture predominated, Kazakhstan possessed a distinctive socio-economic structure: more than sixty percent of the population were nomads or semi-nomads, and the livestock economy constituted their primary means of subsistence.

The decision to implement collectivization in this context was not only economic but also ideological in character. It formed part of a broader strategy to transform the Soviet Union into an industrial power by mobilizing agricultural resources for export - specifically grain and livestock products -- in order to generate the foreign currency required to purchase industrial equipment abroad. In this sense, collectivization in Kazakhstan served not merely as an instrument of agrarian transformation, but as a mechanism for advancing the Soviet state's foreign economic objectives.

The coercive character of these transformations was reflected in the methods applied to nomadic households: mass confiscation of livestock, forced resettlement, the destruction of tribal organization, and the repression of the *baystvo* - the traditional Kazakh elite. By 1931, according to the Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, more than eighty percent of all livestock - the primary source of food and exchange - had been confiscated (Abylkhozhin, 1998:45).

This catastrophic decline in livestock numbers had immediate and devastating consequences: deprived of their means of subsistence, nomads died in vast numbers from starvation or were compelled to abandon their traditional territories. According to party reports, during 1931-1933 more than 1.3 million people - out of the republic's total population of approximately 6.2 million - either died or migrated out of Kazakhstan. Of these, more than 600,000 were ethnic Kazakhs, a loss that permanently transformed the ethnic composition of the region (Arkhir Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan, Collection 141, 8 inventories).

Soviet economic policy during these years remained oriented toward export even as famine

intensified. In 1931, the Soviet Union exported 4.8 million tons of grain, a portion of which was produced on Kazakh collective and state farms. This occurred against the backdrop of mortality rates of up to forty percent in some villages; in certain districts, such as Karaganda and Kyzyl-Orda, death rates reached sixty to seventy percent. Archival documents confirm that despite signals of impending catastrophe from the regions, the centre did not reduce livestock or grain confiscation quotas, which attests to the deliberate and politically motivated character of the food extraction policy (Omarbekov, 2023:39).

Notably, even party reports recorded widespread expressions of "anti-Soviet sentiment" among the nomadic population - sentiments that arose not from ideological opposition but from existential desperation. The population associated hunger and the deaths of their families directly with state actions, demonstrating that collectivization was not perceived by its victims as inevitable progress but as externally imposed violence.

Collectivization in Kazakhstan thus performed a dual function: it served as an instrument of internal political control over the "national periphery," while simultaneously providing the Soviet Union with resources for export, which was critically important in the context of rapid industrialization. The famine was not a consequence of policy errors; it was a component of a large-scale strategy of state coercion aimed at redirecting resources in favor of the centres of industrial power.

Demographic Consequences: Mortality, Migration, and Ethno-Demographic Restructuring

The famine in Kazakhstan during 1930-1933 had not only catastrophic short-term consequences but also constituted a turning point in the demographic history of the republic. Estimates place the total human losses for the period 1931-1933 at between 1.3 and 1.5 million people -- approximately one quarter of the entire population of the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic at that time. Of these, more than one million were ethnic Kazakhs, leading to

a dramatic reduction in their share of the republic's total population, from 60.3 percent in 1926 to 38 percent by 1939 (Cameron, 2018:86).

Mass mortality was compounded by large-scale forced migration. According to the Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, approximately 615,000 to 650,000 Kazakhs were compelled to leave the territory of the republic. Primary migration routes led to neighboring Soviet republics -- Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Russia - as well as to China, Mongolia, and Afghanistan. The severing of connections with traditional nomadic territories, the depopulation of rural settlements, and the transition of surviving migrants to a settled way of life collectively produced a fundamental transformation of the social landscape of Kazakhstan.

This demographic inversion - a sharp reduction in the proportion of the titular nationality and a corresponding increase in the share of the Russian-speaking population - resulted from both biological factors (excess mortality) and political factors (migration and the deliberate resettlement of other population groups into Kazakhstan). Within the framework of Soviet policies of "internationalization" and economic development of the republics, Kazakhstan was effectively transformed into an experimental site for a Soviet internal colonization model, one that would have lasting effects on the cultural, linguistic, and political balance of the region (Pianciola, 2022:251).

It is important to emphasize that the consequences of the famine were not evenly distributed. According to records held in the North Kazakhstan State Archives, the worst-affected regions were those with predominantly nomadic populations - Uralsk, Cherlak, and Kokchetav - where mortality reached up to seventy percent in some districts, while in certain Russian-speaking settled areas the death rate did not exceed five to twenty percent. This disparity deepened existing ethnic imbalances and intensified social fragmentation in the context of famine and repression (Severo-Kazakhstanskiy

gosudarstvennyy arkhiv. Files for the Cherlak, Kokchetav, and Uralsk Districts for 1930–1933).

The famine in Kazakhstan thus constituted not only the consequence of agrarian policy but also an instrument of ethno-demographic transformation. It profoundly reshaped the composition of the population, destroyed traditional ways of life, and created the preconditions for long-term assimilation and structural dependence of the peripheral regions on the Soviet centre.

Ireland, 1845-1852: The Great Famine and Its Long-Term Consequences

The Great Irish Famine of the mid-nineteenth century, known in Irish as *An Gorta Mor*, was not only the largest humanitarian disaster in the history of the island but one of the most significant demographic transformations in the history of Europe. Between 1845 and 1852, according to various estimates, between one and 1.5 million people died from starvation and associated epidemics, and approximately two million more emigrated, primarily to the United States, Canada, and Australia (Digital Irish Famine Archive & Atlas of the Great Irish Famine).

The immediate cause of the catastrophe was an outbreak of potato blight -- the fungal disease *Phytophthora infestans* - which destroyed the primary food source of the Irish rural poor. The scale of the resulting disaster, however, was not the product of a biological crisis alone. Colonial British policy played a decisive role: at the height of the famine, Ireland continued to export food - - primarily meat and grain -- to England, under military protection and with the active participation of landlords. Despite repeated appeals to lift export restrictions, the London authorities adhered for an extended period to the principles of non-intervention in the market, a commitment that effectively condemned the population to starvation (Inchausti, 2024:39).

The demographic impact of the famine was profound and long-lasting. By 1851, Ireland's population had fallen from approximately 8.2 million to 6.5 million. Particularly significant was not only the absolute decline in population but

the structural transformation that accompanied it: the aging of the population accelerated, the birth rate fell sharply, and a process of internal depopulation began as villages emptied across entire regions. Many areas, particularly in the west of the country, never recovered their former population levels.

Emigration was not merely a forced response to famine but became an institutionalized form of demographic survival. In 1847, known as "Black '47," more than 250,000 people left Ireland, the majority destined for the United States and Canada. Mass emigration continued for the remainder of the century: from 1851 to 1900, approximately three million more people departed. Many settled in the industrial centers of North America, forming stable Irish diaspora communities that not only preserved a distinctive ethnic identity but actively shaped the politics, culture, and trade union movement of their adopted countries ().

Emigration flows disproportionately affected the young and economically active population, and particularly women. According to data from the Famine Irish Passenger Archive System (FIPAS), nearly 400,000 single women between the ages of fifteen and thirty emigrated from Ireland during the famine years, producing significant gender and age imbalances within the remaining rural population. This contributed to the accelerated aging and prolonged demographic stagnation of the Irish countryside (Irish Ship Arrivals at the Port of New York, 2012:1).

Beyond its demographic impact, the Great Famine exercised a powerful cultural and psychological influence. The memory of the disaster became embedded in Irish culture, folklore, and political discourse, serving as the defining marker of colonial injustice and a central argument in the independence movement. In the literature, songs, and visual arts of the Irish diaspora - particularly in Boston and New York - - the famine became an element of national mythology, reinforcing a collective sense of shared destiny and historical trauma (Mukerjee, 2010:312).

The Great Irish Famine thus not only radically altered the size and structure of the country's population but gave rise to a global diaspora, transformed the social fabric of rural Ireland, and fundamentally redefined national identity. The Irish case is particularly instructive with regard to the formation of durable transnational migration systems - systems whose effects have extended to the present day.

Following the end of the famine in 1852, Ireland entered a new phase in its demographic history, characterized not by recovery but by prolonged stagnation and the structural transformation of rural life. The loss of a significant portion of the population over several decades was not a temporary aberration but the beginning of a sustained trend: the aging of society, the decline of agricultural production, and a permanent demographic outflow (Limerick Archives).

Since the majority of emigrants were young, able-bodied individuals, the remaining population consisted predominantly of the elderly, women, and children. Census data from 1871 indicate that the proportion of the population over fifty years of age in the western counties had nearly doubled compared to figures from 1841. This produced a reduction in the agricultural labor force, widespread land abandonment, and a decline in agricultural productivity. The shortage of young men impeded any sustained effort to rebuild the rural economy (Inchausti, 2024:39)..

From the 1860s onward, a wave of land consolidation accelerated as small farmers went bankrupt or abandoned their holdings, and landlords consolidated parcels into larger pastures. Rural population continued to decline even after the famine had ended and food prices had stabilized. The Irish village lost not only its people but also the institutional mechanisms of self-reproduction: communal forms of cooperation, family bonds, and local networks of mutual assistance.

By 1900, Ireland's population had still not returned to the level of 1845; the country continued to lose population through emigration, primarily to the United States. This makes the Irish case particularly significant within the

context of global demographic dynamics. Scholars have characterized it as among the earliest global migration catastrophes in modern history - one caused not only by economic crisis but by the failures and coercive structures of colonial governance. Mass emigration from Ireland to North America became a prototype for the waves of refugees and labor migrants that would subsequently emerge from Eastern Europe, India, China, and the Middle East. The diaspora formed in this process not only transformed the demographic composition of the receiving countries but became a new demographic and political resource for the Irish people themselves - preserving identity, economic solidarity, and political influence across national borders (Mukerjee, 2010:315).

India: The Bengal Famine of 1943 -- Colonial Food Policy, War Supplies, and Systemic Collapse

The Bengal famine of 1943 stands as one of the most tragic episodes in the history of British India, and ranks alongside the famines in Kazakhstan and Ireland as an example of how the politically motivated management of food supply can lead to the deaths of millions. According to various estimates, between 2.1 and 3 million people perished from starvation and associated epidemics in Bengal during this period (Davis, 2000:125).

During the Second World War, India was treated by the metropolitan power primarily as a logistical base and source of strategic resources. The so-called "denial policy" - which involved the strategic destruction of boats, livestock, and rice stocks - was implemented to impede a potential Japanese advance into Bengal, but in practice it deprived millions of people of access to food and the means of subsistence. Simultaneously, food reserves were concentrated in Calcutta and Madras, where military garrisons and supply depots were maintained, leaving rural areas without basic support.

One of the most striking aspects of the Bengal famine was the failure of the colonial administration to organize an adequate food distribution system. Requests for external

assistance directed to London were ignored (Das, 1949:54). Winston Churchill's communications made plain his view that the Indian population was undeserving of diverted grain supplies intended for British troops. Moreover, despite the availability of reserves, the movement of rice between Indian provinces was blocked in order to maintain "stability" in regions of strategic British interest (Mukerjee, 2010:317).

The collapse of the food market, compounded by rising prices, panic, and speculation, forced small farmers to sell land and livestock for a single sack of rice. Epidemics of cholera and dysentery broke out in urban centers, driving mortality still higher. Many dying children were documented in photographs by Sunil Janah and in reports by Ian Stephens, editor of *The Statesman*, after which the scale of the catastrophe gained a measure of international attention.

The Bengal famine cannot therefore be classified as a natural disaster. It was the structural collapse of a food system, intensified by wartime militarization and a racial-imperial logic of governance in which colonial populations were accorded secondary status relative to imperial strategic interests. As in the cases of Kazakhstan and Ireland, the deaths of millions were not an accident but the outcome of policy decisions made at the metropolitan level.

The Bengal famine of 1943 triggered, alongside mass mortality, a wave of internal migration. Tens of thousands of peasants and landless laborers who had lost access to food and employment began moving toward major cities - Calcutta, Howrah, and Dhaka - in search of any form of assistance. These movements were spontaneous and unorganized, and were often perceived by local authorities primarily as a threat to sanitary and social order. People died on railway platforms, in alleyways, and outside markets and hospitals -- frequently without receiving basic care (Fay, 1994:123).

The breakdown of food access further exacerbated conditions for those who had fled: deprived of means of subsistence, refugees had no possibility of returning to their home villages, whose rural economies had been destroyed,

crops lost, and property sold or abandoned. The famine transformed tens of thousands of people into what might be described as a "mobile population of despair," destabilizing not only the countryside but also urban spaces, producing surges in homelessness, social unrest, crime, and epidemic disease in the major centers of Bengal.

The second major demographic consequence was a sharp decline in birth rates. Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen estimate that female fertility in the affected areas fell by thirty to fifty percent during 1943-1945, attributable not only to high mortality but to biological exhaustion, acute stress, widespread malnutrition, and the destruction of family structures. As in Kazakhstan during the 1930s, the Bengal famine produced a pronounced disruption of the demographic cycle -- the formation of what demographers have termed a "lost generation," the statistical trace of which persisted in Indian population data well into the postwar decades (Drèze, 1989:103).

The third major consequence of the famine was the political mobilization of the population. Although the anti-colonial movement in India had already achieved mass support before 1943, the Bengal famine served as a powerful catalyst for its radicalization. The colonial administration's failure to save millions, the indifference of London's responses, and the refusal to redirect adequate grain supplies -- all occurring in plain sight of mass death - became a compelling argument for immediate liberation from British rule.

Photographs, newspapers, street theatre, poetry, and the speeches of young activists of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League together conveyed the image of famine as evidence of imperial cruelty. Bengal was transformed from an imperial administrative centre into a symbol of the tragedy of colonial domination, and it was here that some of the most intense popular outbursts against British rule occurred in the years 1945-1947. The famine of 1943 was thus not only a demographic shock but also a major turning point in Indian history - one that exposed the limits of imperial authority, demolished the mythology of the British

Empire's "civilizing mission," and created the conditions for the accelerated departure of the colonial power in 1947 (Simonow, 2019:29).

Comparative and Analytical Discussion

Despite evident differences in geographic, cultural, and temporal context, the tragedies of Kazakhstan, Ireland, and India share a common structural mechanism: the transnational redistribution of food resources, centered on forced migration, grain export, and the exercise of global economic pressure. These famines cannot be understood as purely domestic events. Each was embedded within a global system in which agricultural regions functioned as peripheries, supplying food, labor, and currency to centralized states or empires.

The first and most conspicuous transnational mechanism is the export of food in conditions of domestic catastrophe. In Ireland, despite mass famine, grain, meat, and other agricultural products continued to be shipped to England; in India, rice, wheat, and jute were exported primarily in support of British military operations in Burma and the Pacific. In the Soviet Union, while exports during the height of the Kazakh famine were not of comparable scale, the policy of the centre was oriented toward the sale of grain and livestock abroad in order to purchase industrial machinery, as required by the Five-Year Plan (Snyder, 2010:25).

Each of these tragedies thus demonstrates that food exports could persist in conditions of domestic famine when dictated by geopolitical or economic priorities. Such decisions were taken without adequate regard for their demographic or humanitarian consequences, embedding them within global food chains of power in which the lives of colonial or peripheral populations were accorded secondary importance.

The second key transnational mechanism is migration as both a demographic response and a form of the redistribution of labor. The Irish case constitutes one of the earliest examples in modern history of a mass diaspora generated by famine, with millions of refugees moving to the United States, Canada, and Australia to form stable transatlantic communities. In India,

internal migration destroyed the social fabric of rural villages and produced long-term changes in the patterns of urbanization and poverty. Kazakhstan, while not generating a global diaspora of comparable scale, became the site of mass internal displacement to other Soviet republics and the object of Soviet internal colonization policies.

These migrations were not demographically neutral: they transformed the ethnic composition of regions, dismantled traditional economies (nomadic pastoralism, village communal agriculture), and gave rise to new political identities -- above all in the cases of the Irish and Indian diasporas. Famine emerged as a mechanism for transforming not only the size of populations but their spatial distribution and political consciousness.

Finally, attention must be directed to the global chains of influence that linked local tragedies to decisions made in London, Moscow, and New Delhi. In Ireland, the decision not to intervene in the market was taken at Westminster despite rising death tolls. In India, the refusal to reroute grain ships was maintained despite protests from colonial administrators and governors' reports on the evolving disaster. In the Soviet Union, centralized resource-extraction plans were implemented despite accumulating signals of catastrophe from regional authorities.

All three cases demonstrate that power over food constitutes power over the population itself. The management of supplies, transport networks, and distribution mechanisms is not simply a matter of logistics but an instrument of political governance. Hunger - which is, on one hand, a consequence of economic failure and, on the other, a deliberate political outcome - becomes part of the infrastructure of control in the globalized world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Sabot, 2017).

The Politics of Famine as an Imperial Demographic Strategy

In all three cases examined - Soviet Kazakhstan, British Ireland, and colonial Bengal -- famine was not only a consequence of a food crisis but also an instrument of population control. By

manipulating the distribution of resources in conditions of scarcity, states and empires enacted an implicit yet powerful demographic policy directed at the structural transformation of their peripheral territories.

The Soviet model in Kazakhstan illustrates the deliberate destruction of nomadic life through forced collectivization, the collection of food taxes, deportations, and the administrative dismantling of traditional social bonds (). These measures resulted not only in the physical destruction of hundreds of thousands of people but also in the elimination of an autonomous ethnocultural system -- a process that corresponds, in its essential character, to scholarly definitions of genocide as "the destruction of the conditions necessary for the reproduction of a group." (Devereux, 2009:31).

British policy in Ireland and India, while differing from the Soviet case in form, followed a comparable logic of demographic reformatting through either economic passivity or the aggressive mobilization of resources. In Ireland, this took the form of market non-intervention; in Bengal, it manifested as total state control over transport, supplies, and reserves. In both instances, imperial policy demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice civilian lives in service of strategic or ideological purposes: the defense of the imperial economic order, military mobilization, and the maintenance of metropolitan stability (Graziosi, 2016:7).

The theoretical framework of the "politics of hunger" is thus empirically confirmed across all three cases. Famine becomes not a failure of governance but a method of governance: a means of disciplining the agricultural sector, dismantling undesirable social structures, controlling migration, and redistributing labor. It operates as a form of imperial demographic design, integrated into long-term strategies of political management.

Transnational Memory and Migration as Foundations of Identity

One of the most significant and enduring consequences of these catastrophes has been their memorial and identificatory legacy. The

diasporas formed in the aftermath of famine became not only demographic but also cultural and political actors. The Irish diaspora in the United States and Canada legitimized its historical presence through the collective memory of the famine, which was transformed into a political resource in the struggle for Irish independence and the rights of immigrant communities (Orjuela, 2024).

The intellectual and cultural tradition of Bengal, particularly following the partition of 1947, integrated the famine into the framework of national trauma, a process reflected in poetry, cinema, and folk culture. The memory of the 1943 famine became one of the moral foundations for the rejection of colonial subordination and the construction of a new national narrative rooted in shared suffering and resistance ().

Post-Soviet Kazakh identity has also increasingly grounded itself in the rehabilitation of famine memory - a memory that was systematically suppressed throughout the Soviet period. This transformation from collective amnesia to conscious memorialization reflects the emergence of a new cultural subjectivity, in which historical trauma is integrated into the national sense of self (Pianciola, 2001 : 249).

Memory and migration are thus not merely consequences of famine but active factors in the construction of modern identity. Transnational communities formed in the aftermath of catastrophe become custodians of a distinctive historical inheritance, transmitted across generations and engaged in global political and humanitarian discourse. Famine is transformed from a biological and economic phenomenon into a memorial marker - one capable of uniting, mobilizing, and providing political legitimacy to communities that survived it (Richter, 2020:481).

Conclusion

The cases of mass famine examined in this article are not simply tragedies of the past but archetypes of managed demographic transformation. They demonstrate how famine became an instrument of imperial biopolitical control and how food policy served as a

mechanism for the redistribution of power and the reorganization of social space.

Soviet Kazakhstan, colonial Ireland, and Bengal were each drawn into projects in which modernization and centralized state control displaced viable local practices and economies. Behind each famine lay programs designed to alter ethnic balances, destroy traditional ways of life, suppress resistance, and eliminate populations deemed surplus to imperial requirements. Although the historical contexts differ significantly, the demographic patterns recur with remarkable consistency: sharp mortality surges, waves of emigration, and shifts in ethnic composition appear across all three cases.

Contemporary global challenges - from climate-related catastrophes to mass forced displacement -- demand a reckoning with this historical experience. The memory of famine, preserved in diaspora communities, archival records, and cultural practices, constitutes a vital resource for political self-understanding and historical consciousness.

This study offers not only a historical account but also a theoretical framework, one that treats famine as a controlled political strategy rather than an accidental outcome. This perspective opens new avenues for the study of empires, populations, and power - and provides new answers to an enduring questions.

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