

The Irish Potato Famine
AP World History
Kienast

In 1998, British Prime Minister Tony Blair apologized for doing "too little" in response to the Irish Potato Famine of the 19th century that killed one million people and brought about the emigration of millions more. Blair's statement draws attention to the question of what caused the famine. Up to now, the popular theory is that the Irish were not particularly good farmers and excessively dependent on the potato. As a result they died by the hundreds of thousands when a blight appeared and ruined their food source, in the midst of one of the fastest economic growth periods in human history. The Irish Potato Famine lasted just a few years, from around 1845 to 1852, but killed about a million people and forced the emigration of around a million more. The Irish population at that point was reliant on one specific white potato, the Irish lumper, as a primary food source for about a third of the country. Potatoes, like most other members of the nightshade family (tomatoes, eggplant), are native to the New World, not to Ireland. In the mid-19th century, travel between the New and Old World increased, bringing over new strains of *Phytophthora infestans*. One of those strains eventually mutated into a killer.

But was the Potato Famine an ecological accident, as historians usually say? Like most famines, it had little to do with declines in food production as such. Adam Smith was right that "bad seasons" cause "dearth," but "the violence of well-intentioned governments" can convert "dearth into famine." In fact, the most glaring cause of the famine may not have been a plant disease, but England's long-running political hegemony over Ireland. The English conquered Ireland, several times, and took ownership of vast agricultural territory. Large chunks of land were given to Englishmen. These landowners in turn hired farmers to manage their holdings. The managers then rented small plots to the local population in return for labor and cash crops. Competition for land resulted in high rents and smaller plots, thereby squeezing the Irish to subsistence and providing a large financial drain on the economy. The Irish people were able to grow large quantities of nutritious potatoes that they fed their families and animals. Britain also did not help Ireland by developing roads, rail lines or ports. When food aid from Britain was sent to help starving Irish people during the famine it often sat in the few ports that Ireland had and was never distributed due to the lack of transportation.