

## **THE DIMENSIONS OF FAMINE. Alan Macfarlane**

### **Famine in Asia**

Malthus rightly saw China as one of the most terribly afflicted of all countries. It was a country where in 'times of famine' which 'are here but too frequent', 'millions of people' perished of hunger.<sup>1</sup> The famines which followed unfavourable seasons 'are perhaps the most powerful of all the positive checks to the Chinese population...'<sup>2</sup> In China it is estimated that 'there was a drought or flood-induced famine in at least one province almost every year from 108 B.C. to A.D. 1911 (Mallory 1926).<sup>3</sup> In the seventeenth century, for instance, 'famines became common, especially in north China, worsened by unusually cold and dry weather<sup>4</sup>;'...nine million fatalities were caused by the famine in north China from 1876 to 1879.<sup>5</sup> Famine continued in China until very recently. In 1920 and 1921 in certain provinces 'at least 500,000 people died, and out of an estimated 48.8 million in these five provinces, over 19.8 million were declared destitute.<sup>6</sup> Between two and three million died in Honan province in 1943.<sup>7</sup> The bungled reforms of Chairman Mao led to another massive famine in China. The 'Great Leap Forward' led to 'famine on a gigantic scale, a famine that claimed 20 million lives or more between 1959 and 1962. Many others died shortly thereafter...especially children, weakened by years of progressive malnutrition.<sup>8</sup> China has only just escaped from famine.

South Asia is another area where massive famines have occurred until very recently. Malthus saw it as one of the great famine areas of the world: 'India...has in all ages been subject to the most dreadful famines.'<sup>9</sup> The historical situation was summarized in 1911. 'Famines seem to recur in India at periodical intervals...Every five or ten years the annual scarcity widens its area and becomes a recognized famine; every fifty or a hundred years whole provinces are involved, loss of life becomes widespread, and a great famine is recorded. In the 140 years since Warren Hastings initiated British rule in India, there have been nineteen famines and five severe scarcities.'<sup>10</sup>

Braudel refers to the 'terrible and almost general famine in India in 1630-1.' He quotes a Dutch merchant: 'People wandered hither and thither, helpless, having abandoned their towns or villages. Their condition could be recognised immediately: sunken eyes, wan faces, lips flecked with foam, lower jaw

<sup>1</sup>Malthus, i, 131

<sup>2</sup>Malthus, i, 135

<sup>3</sup>Jones, *Miracle*, 19. There is a list of the 1,282 Chinese famines in the 2,019 years preceding 1911, and some terrible accounts of them in Erlich, *Population*, 13-15. Watkins, on the other hand minimizes the severity of Chinese famines (Watkins, *Famines*, xerox, 653).

<sup>4</sup>Spence, *China*, 21

<sup>5</sup>Southard, *Famine*

<sup>6</sup>Spence, *China*, 309

<sup>7</sup>Arnold, *Famine* (xerox), 20.

<sup>8</sup>Spence, *China*, 583

<sup>9</sup>*Population*, i, 119

<sup>10</sup>*Enc. Britannica*, *Famine*, p.167; for a history of early Indian famines, see Aykroyd, *Conquest*, p.50ff

projecting, bones protruding through skin, stomach hanging like an empty sack, some of them howling with hunger, begging alms.' Children were sold off, 'the starving split open the stomachs of the dead or dying to "eat the entrails".' 'Hundreds and thousands of people died,' the merchant continued, 'to the point when the country was entirely covered with corpses which stayed unburied...'<sup>11</sup>

In 1769-70, it is estimated that about ten million people died of starvation. In Bengal, for instance, about one third of the inhabitants are thought to have died.<sup>12</sup> Famines continued throughout the nineteenth century. Seavoy lists some twelve major peacetime famines between 1812 and 1901, at least half of which caused an estimated mortality of over one million persons.<sup>13</sup> The closing decade of the nineteenth century 'was distinguished by the occurrence of terrible famines', indirect calculations suggest that '19 million persons' dying 'may be taken as a rough estimate of loss due to famines.'<sup>14</sup> Others estimate that 'ten famines in India between 1860 and 1900 are estimated to have resulted in fifteen million deaths...'<sup>15</sup> A Census Report of 1901 stated that 'In ancient times the occurrence of a severe famine was marked by the disappearance of a third or a fourth of the population of the area afflicted.'<sup>16</sup>

After 1901 there was a lull in famines, but they then recurred. The Bengal famine of 1943-4 has been extensively studied. It is reckoned that it took between 1.5 and 3 million lives, which was 'due in part to the complications of war and the (British) administration's incompetence, but little to do with crop failure.' A combination of 'food hoarding and speculation led to very large increases in food prices', and people did not have the 'entitlements', i.e. the earning power, to buy food. <sup>17</sup> Even in 1966-7 'only

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<sup>11</sup>Braudel, *Capitalism*, 41

<sup>12</sup>Berg, cited in Jones, *Miracle*, 29

<sup>13</sup>Seavoy, *Famine*, 242

<sup>14</sup>Cassen, 80

<sup>15</sup>Southard, 'Famine'

<sup>16</sup> Cassen, p.80, quoting the 1901 Census Report. There is an excellent description and analysis of the Bengal famines in Hunter, *Annals of Bengal*, pp.28-55. On the decline of famines in India, see McAlpin, *Famines* (xerox).

<sup>17</sup>Cassen, *India*, 79; Sean, *Famines*, Ch.6; Aykroyd, *Conquest*, ch.7

a major inflow of food ...saved India from famines in which hundreds of thousands, if not millions, might have died..."<sup>18</sup> The "Bangladesh-Bengal-Assam food shortage of 1974-5 developed into a famine that claimed an estimated 1.8 million lives."<sup>19</sup>

Special conditions attended the twentieth century famines; war and flooding in particular. On the other hand, in the case of the nineteenth century famines, 'the principal proximate cause was drought, brought about by the failure of monsoon rains over entire regions.'<sup>20</sup> The monsoons continued to fail through the twentieth century, yet there were no longer drought-induced famines.

One feature of these famines is worth noting, namely the way in which people were actually killed. In a detailed analysis of the demography of the five largest South Asian famines, that is those of 1876-8, 1896-7, 1899-1900, the Bengal famine of 1943-4 and the Bangladesh famine of 1974-5, Dyson came to a surprising conclusion. While the major cause of the famine was drought, the major cause of the deaths was not starvation, but epidemic disease. Furthermore, this epidemic disease, mainly cholera and malaria, occurred as conditions began to improve and the first rains began to fall.

In the 1877-8 famine, 'the available data suggest that we are observing the confluence of (at least) two major epidemics. The first was probably cholera...But the most important single candidate...was **malaria**.'<sup>21</sup> In the famines of 1896-7, 'the initial rise in the death rate, peaking in June, was largely due to cholera. But the bulk of the rise (peaking in August-September) came with the resumption of the rains and agricultural operations and was thought largely to reflect an increase in malaria...'<sup>22</sup> The same was true in 1899-1900: 'there was first an outbreak of cholera and then probably an epidemic of malaria which broadly coincided with the resumption of monsoon rains.'<sup>23</sup> Likewise in 1943-4, 'There was an outbreak of cholera in 1943...and smallpox in 1944. But malaria was probably the most important single cause of death.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Cassen, *Population*, 214

<sup>19</sup>Seavoy, *Famines*, 263

<sup>20</sup>Dyson, *i*, *Famines*, 6

<sup>21</sup>*italics in original*; Dyson, *i*, 14

<sup>22</sup>Dyson, *i*, 15-16

<sup>23</sup>*ibid*, 17

<sup>24</sup>Dyson, *ii*, 282; for a similar link between cholera,

The fact that most deaths were caused by cholera and malaria suggests that we need to widen our search for changes in famine mortality. The supply of food has to be put into the context of sanitation, nutrition, working habits and many other factors which are all inter-connected.

### **Famine in Europe.**

Famine continued as a threat and an actuality over parts of eastern Europe until the middle of the twentieth century. 'The East was the bad side of Europe. Famine raged there long after the eighteenth century...'<sup>25</sup> A particularly massive famine hit Russia in 1602, for instance, as the weather deteriorated.<sup>26</sup> Famines continued until fairly recently. 'Russia was scourged by major famines eleven times between 1845 and 1922.'<sup>27</sup> The terrible famine of 1891-2, for instance, was described by Tolstoy; that of 1921-2 killed at least three million people.<sup>28</sup> Then came one of the worst famines, that caused by Stalin's policies in 1932-3. Kravachenko quotes a young peasant woman: 'I will not tell you about the dead...The half-dead, the nearly-dead are even worse. There are hundreds of people in Petrovo bloated with hunger. I don't know how many die every day. Many are so weak that they no longer come out of their houses. A wagon goes around now and then to pick up the corpses. We've eaten everything we could lay our hands on - cats, dogs, field mice, birds. When it's light tomorrow you will see the trees stripped of their bark...And the horse manure has been eaten...Sometimes there are whole grains in it.'<sup>29</sup>

Serious famine is recorded for parts of northern Europe from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. A contemporary described a terrible famine in Sweden in 1596 as follows: 'People ground and chopped many unsuitable things into bread; such as mash, chaff, bark, buds, nettles, leaves, hay, straw, peatmoss, nutshells, pea-stalks etc. This made people so weak and their bodies so swollen that

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typhoid and famine in a Sudanese famine, see Curtis et al, Preventing Famine, 32

<sup>25</sup>Braudlel, Capitalism, 42

<sup>26</sup>described in Mousnier, Peasant, 180

<sup>27</sup>Southard, 'Famine'

<sup>28</sup>Aykroyd, Conquest, 89-93

<sup>29</sup>Bennett, 'Famine', Enc. Soc. Sc. 322

innumerable people died. Many widows, too, were found dead on the ground with red hummock grass, seeds which grew in the fields, and other kinds of grass in their mouths. People were found dead in the houses, under barns, in the ovens of bath houses and wherever they had been able to squeeze in, so that, God knows, there was enough to do getting them to the graveyard, though the dogs ate many of the corpses. Children starved to death at their mothers' breast, for they had nothing to give them suck.<sup>130</sup>

In Finland, the 1696-7 famine was one of the worst in European history; it is estimated that a 'quarter or a third of the Finnish population disappeared at that time.'<sup>131</sup> Famines continued through the eighteenth century in this region. We are told that 'At least nine severe harvest failures were recorded in the Scandinavian countries between 1740 and 1800, each resulting in a substantial rise of the death rate. In Norway, the death rate in 1741 was more than three times as high as in 1736-1740...In Sweden, during the severe famine of 1773, the death rate rose to 52.5 per thousand population.'<sup>132</sup>

Likewise Scotland suffered from famine until the late eighteenth century. Malthus noted that 'The years 1635, 1680, 1688... the years 1740, 1756, 1766, 1778, 1782 and 1783...are all mentioned, in different places, as years of very great suffering from want. In the year 1680, so many families perished from this cause that for six miles, in a well-inhabited extent, there was not a smoke remaining.'<sup>133</sup> There was a terrible famine, for example, in 1623. We are told that 'many died in the streets and on highway sydes for verie want of food, famished.' Another contemporary described how 'in the end there was a great death of persons of all ranks, but specialie of the poore, which dued through famine in the fields and the hie ways.'<sup>134</sup> Graham gives graphic accounts of a number of these famines and starvation in the period 1700-1750.<sup>135</sup> Martin Martin described how in the Outer Hebrides 'the late years of scarcity brought them very low, and many of the poor people have died by famine'<sup>136</sup> The terrible starvation related to the potato blight in Ireland in the mid nineteenth century, showed a society still subject to

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<sup>130</sup>quoted in Appleby, *Famines*, 133

<sup>131</sup>Udel, *Capitalism*, 42; cf also Flinn, *European (xerox)*, 50

<sup>132</sup>UN, *Determinants*, 51

<sup>133</sup>*Population*, i, 275

<sup>134</sup>Quoted in Flinn, *European (xerox)*, 51

<sup>135</sup>Graham, *Scotland in C18*, 246ff

<sup>136</sup>*Western Isles*, 95

famine until a very late date.<sup>37</sup>

The pattern of famine crises caused by bad weather or war continued until the later eighteenth century over much of central and southern Europe. The later sixteenth century and first half of the seventeenth century was a particularly difficult time. 'Two great famines - those of 1594-7 and 1659-62 - had a particularly disastrous impact on Europe in this century.'<sup>38</sup> Braudel summarized the situation thus: 'famine only disappeared from the West at the close of the eighteenth century, or even later...'<sup>39</sup>

Braudel also described the situation in one of the wealthier countries in Western Europe, France. 'A privileged country like France is said to have experienced 10 general famines during the tenth century: 26 in the eleventh; 2 in the twelfth; 4 in the fourteenth; 7 in the fifteenth; 13 in the sixteenth; 11 in the seventeenth and 16 in the eighteenth.'<sup>40</sup> Even this summary, Braudel believes, runs a risk of 'over-optimism' because 'it omits the hundreds and hundreds of local famines.'<sup>41</sup>

In the middle of the seventeenth century, the situation was particularly grave. The Electors of Burgundy, for instance, sent a protest to the King in 1662 which stated that 'famine this year has put an end to over seventeen thousand families in your province and forced a third of the inhabitants, even in the good towns, to eat wild plants.' The chronicle even alleged that 'Some people ate human flesh'. Ten years earlier 'the people of Lorraine and other surrounding lands are reduced to such extremities that, like animals, they eat the grass in the meadows...and are black and thin as skeletons.'<sup>42</sup> Jones reports a study by Rich and Wilson which suggest that 'death tolls for famine and disease in Louis XIV's France' show a peak of two million in 1692-4, 'or 1.9 per cent of the European population.'<sup>43</sup> We are told that 'the failed harvest of 1693 caused an apocalyptic, medieval-type dearth which killed millions of people

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<sup>37</sup>cf Woodham Smith

<sup>38</sup>Kamen, 34

<sup>39</sup>Braudel, *Capitalism*, 38-9

<sup>40</sup>Braudel, 39

<sup>41</sup>ibid

<sup>42</sup>Braudel, 42

<sup>43</sup>Jones, *Miracle*, 30

in France and the neighbouring countries.<sup>44</sup>

Two famous regional studies give graphic documentation. In the south, Ladurie's study of the Languedoc describes frequent famines. He charts increasing difficulties emerging into a crisis after 1526. By 1528 'famine was raging in Languedoc.'<sup>45</sup> In the 1580's the poor folk were 'forced to eat acorns, wild roots, bracken... grape seeds...'<sup>46</sup> A famine of the 1590s is also recorded.<sup>47</sup> Famine and disease again struck in the 1680's and 1690's.<sup>48</sup> Another account of the famine regime is contained in Goubert's study of the Beauvais in north central France. He gives a list of famines in this area which continued until the 1740's; most occurred between 1630 and 1742.<sup>49</sup>

One interesting fact to emerge from recent study of later French famines, which fits with the Indian evidence, is that while famines always decreased nuptiality and fertility, they did not always cause great mortality, except when linked to epidemics. Dupaquier concludes that 'the major demographic crises of the seventeenth century...resulted from a conjunction of scarcity and epidemic disease...the classic model of subsistence crises can be completed by taking into account the role of epidemic and fungal infections.'<sup>50</sup>

In Germany, famine continued into the eighteenth century. Taking a lower estimate, East Prussia 'lost 250,000 people or forty-one per cent of its population to starvation and disease in 1708-11'<sup>51</sup>: Famines occurred in Silesia in 1730, in Saxony and southern Germany in 1771-2, in and beyond the boundaries of Bavaria in 1816-17.<sup>52</sup> In northern Italy, a report of 1767 suggested that the '316 preceding years

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<sup>44</sup>Ladurie, *Feast*, 68

<sup>45</sup>Ladurie, *Peasants*, 135

<sup>46</sup>p.198

<sup>47</sup>p.199

<sup>48</sup>p.244

<sup>49</sup>e.g. Goubert, p.75

<sup>50</sup>in Walter and Schofield, *Famine*, 198

<sup>51</sup>Jones, *Miracle*, 29

<sup>52</sup>Braudel, p.39

included 111 years of famine compared with only 16 of good harvests.<sup>53</sup> Cipolla cites a number of descriptions of famines in Italy for the fifteenth and sixteenth century, for instance in the northern Italian town of Bergamo in 1630 a physician described how 'most of these poor wretches are blackened, parched, emaciated, weak and sickly...they wander about the city and then fall dead one by one in the streets and piazzas and by the Palazzo.'<sup>64</sup>

Standing back from the details, it would appear that Malthus was correct in believing that famine was still a very serious threat over much of Europe until at least the middle of the eighteenth century. Yet both he and Adam Smith were also right in suggesting that the situation, bad as it was in Europe, was not as serious as that in China and India. Looking back from the vantage point of two centuries later, E.L.Jones concludes that 'At the minimum the effective demographic shock in Asia was double that in Europe, and the best of the estimates suggest that it was an order of magnitude greater.'<sup>55</sup> Or as Petersen puts it 'On the scale of world history Europe's food shortages have been relatively puny. The normal death rate of the great civilizations of Asia, on the contrary, "may be said to contain a constant famine factor".'<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Braudel, *Capitalism*, 39

<sup>54</sup>Cipolla, *Before*, 159; famines in 1527-9 are alluded to in Flinn, *European (xerox)*, 53

<sup>55</sup>Jones, 30

<sup>56</sup>Petersen, *Malthus*, 164