

## S5 The Great Famine (Ireland)

The Irish Potato Famine, also known as the Great Hunger, began in 1845 when a fungus-like organism called *Phytophthora infestans* (or *P. infestans*) spread rapidly throughout Ireland. In the first year, the infestation ruined around one-half of the potato crop. Over the next seven years, up to three-quarters of the crop was ruined. At the time, Ireland was ruled as a colony of Great Britain. The potato was a main source of food for Irish people, so the infestation had a devastating effect on Ireland and its population. It is estimated that in the seven years of the famine, around one million Irish people died of starvation, and at least another million were forced to leave Ireland as refugees, travelling mostly to North America and Great Britain.

### **Ireland in the 1800s**

After the Acts of Union in 1801, Ireland was effectively governed as a colony of Great Britain until its war of independence in the early 20th century. Together, the combined nations were known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Penal Laws prohibited Irish Catholics from voting or holding elected office. English and Anglo-Irish families owned most of the land. Irish people who practised Catholicism (the majority of Ireland's native population) were not allowed to own or lease land at that time. Instead, they worked as tenant farmers and were forced to pay rent to the landowners.

## **Great Hunger Begins**

The potato was introduced to Ireland by the wealthy land-owning British and soon became a staple food of the poor. When the crops began to fail in 1845, as a result of *P. infestans* infection, Irish leaders in Dublin petitioned Queen Victoria and Parliament to act—and, initially, they did, repealing the so-called “Corn Laws” and their tariffs on grain, which made food such as corn and bread prohibitively expensive. These changes did not alter growing problem of the potato blight. Records from the time show that Ireland continued to export large quantities of food, primarily to Great Britain during the seven years of the famine. Examples of such exports include livestock, butter, peas, beans, fish, and honey. It is believed that quantities of certain exports actually increased during a time when many tenant farmers were unable to produce sufficient food for their own consumption, resulting in hundreds of thousands dying from starvation and malnutrition.

## **Legacy of the Potato Famine**

The exact role of the British government in the Potato Famine and its aftermath—whether it ignored the plight of Ireland’s poor out of malice, or if their collective inaction and inadequate response could be attributed to incompetence—is still being debated.

However, the significance of the Potato Famine (or, in the Irish language, An Gorta Mor) in Irish history, and its contribution to the Irish diaspora of the 19th and 20th centuries, is beyond doubt.

In recent years, cities to which the Irish ultimately emigrated during and in the decades after the event have offered various commemorations to the lives lost. Boston, New York City, Philadelphia and Phoenix in the United States, as well as Montreal and Toronto in Canada, have erected Irish hunger memorials, as have various cities in Ireland, Australia and Great Britain.