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Mr Lamont RID

HISTORIANS AND THE FAMINE

1. I attach the long promised note on how historians have assessed the response of the British governments of the day to the Irish famine. This is in three sections: a brief outline of government policies during the famine, a short summary of the historiography and a selection of quotations.
2. I am not sure what use we can make of all this. There is little here with which to mount a defence of British policy, but I think we agreed that we should not attempt that in any case. There is at least sufficient material to refute the more outrageous accusations of Irish Americans of holocaust, genocide and extermination.
3. I should be grateful for your comments.



E C Hallett

OUTLINE OF BRITISH GOVERNMENT POLICY DURING THE FAMINE

1. The period of the Irish famine, 1845-51, saw two different administrations at Westminster, a Tory Government, under Peel, up to June 1846, and Russell's Whig Government thereafter. While their policy responses to the Famine differed considerably in detail, the underlying philosophy was the same and was reinforced by the fact that Charles Trevelyan was Permanent Secretary at the Treasury throughout the period and exercised a major influence on the approach of both administrations.

2. The Irish famine was triggered in 1845 by a potato blight of unprecedented severity and duration. Previous crop failures in Ireland had been countered by restricting exports and encouraging imports of food. By 1845, however, the prevailing ideological climate had changed. Poverty was increasingly seen as the result of individual moral failings, while the autonomy of the market place had become sacrosanct.

3. The prevailing principles of "political economy" underlay the official response to the famine under both the Peel and Russell Administrations. The most fundamental of these was minimum interference with the market forces of supply and demand. An additional influence on policy was a belief, on the part of a number of key ministers and officials, in "providentialism" - the view that natural disasters, such as the potato blight, reflected the will of God, with which it was both immoral and futile to interfere. Adherents to this view included, significantly, both Charles Wood, Chancellor of the Exchequer under Russell, and Trevelyan.

4. A third major influence on official thinking, under both administrations, was the view of Ireland as an over-populated country, where sub-division of land and dependence on the potato left an excessive amount of idle time to both landlords and peasants. A need was perceived, therefore, to diversify economic activity, end sub-division of land, reduce the role of the potato, and introduce "men of energy and capital" into the economy.

The Peel Government

5. The Peel Government took three major decisions in response to the outbreak of the potato blight. It organised the import of large quantities of "indian corn" (maize) from America, though not for direct supply to the people, but for gradual release onto the market, to keep down the overall price of food. It established a Relief Commission in Dublin, both to coordinate local relief efforts and to organise a programme of public works to promote employment in distressed areas. It removed protectionist duties on the import of grain (the "repeal of the corn laws"). Collectively, these measures had some success, and it is generally held that no-one died of famine during Peel's administration.

The Russell Government

6. In June 1846, Peel's Tory administration was replaced by the Whigs, under Lord John Russell. The accession of the Russell administration coincided with a further, and more extensive, failure of the potato crop. A commitment to free trade was, however, one of the few policies which united the new Government which, as a result, was even more firmly committed to non-intervention in the market ^{1171 270 3331} el's. The first

fruit of this new approach was the abandonment of the policy of importing "indian corn". Trevelyan who continued as Permanent Secretary at the Treasury, with the like-minded Charles Wood as Chancellor of the Exchequer, was instrumental in enforcing the rigorously free-market approach.

7. With the decision of the new administration not to enter the market place and import food, its initial approach to the provision of relief was to continue the programme of public works, though this was to be financed increasingly from local taxation. It is generally considered that this policy was a failure, the works themselves providing little benefit to the communities, while substantially failing as a means of saving lives.

8. At the beginning of 1847, the Russell Government decided on a new approach, abandoning the public works policy and transferring responsibility for providing relief to the Poor Law from the autumn of 1847 onwards. In the interim, relief was to be provided by a network of soup kitchens. The opening of these kitchens in the spring and summer of 1847 was generally successful. For the first and only time during the famine period, relief was provided directly to the people in the form of food.

9. In the autumn of 1847 the Government took the view that the worst of the famine was over and that any continuing need for relief should be met by the Poor Law, administered by the 130 Poor Law unions. It was intended that such relief should be financed exclusively by local taxation (the Poor Law rate), reflecting the view that "Irish property should pay for Irish poverty". This policy proved inadequate, as many of the unions, notably those in the most distressed areas, had insufficient funds, or the capacity for raising them, to meet the demand for relief. Many unions were at or close to insolvency. Despite this, the Government took the view that it had done all that was necessary and only with great reluctance agreed to provide further support, in the form of repayable loans, for those unions which proved unable to finance their own activities.

11. Despite the official view that the famine was over by 1847, the potato crop failed again in 1848, and the blight returned, though in increasingly localised form, in 1849, 1850 and 1851. Government concern at the continuing high level of expenditure needed to bail out insolvent unions resulted in the passage of the Rate-in-Aid Act of 1849, which introduced an additional tax on the wealthier unions in the east, to finance the poorer unions in the west. The rationale behind this new Act was that, notwithstanding the Act of Union and the creation of a supposedly integrated United Kingdom, Irish distress was now to be regarded as an exclusively Irish, rather than a British or an Imperial problem. This approach provoked the resignation of the Chief Poor Law Commissioner, Twistleton, following which he made a number of public statements criticising the Government's failure to prevent starvation in Ireland.

Conclusions

12. During the famine period as a whole, it has been estimated that there were in the region of 1,000,000 "excess deaths". The effects of a natural disaster were accentuated by the official response, which was characterised by firm adherence to free-market principles, a conviction that Irish landlords were feckless and Irish peasants indolent, with the resultant need to restructure Irish economy and site the Act of

Union, a sense that Ireland was both separate and different and that there was no obligation on Britain to alleviate Irish distress.

13. Criticism of the British Government's response was not just with the benefit of hindsight. It came from within its own ranks at the time. The Chief Secretary for Ireland, Clarendon, argued in December 1848, that "...I don't think there is another legislature in Europe that would disregard such suffering as now exists in the west of Ireland, or coldly persist in a policy of extermination." It also came from a select committee set up by the Government to examine the affairs of the Kilrush Union, which concluded that:

"Whether as regards plain principles of humanity, or the literal text and admitted principle of the Poor Law of 1847, a neglect of public duty has occurred and has occasioned a state of things disgraceful to a civilised age and country, for which some authority ought to be held responsible, and would long since have been held responsible had these things occurred in any union in England."

14. At the time of the famine, the UK was the richest and most industrially advanced country in the world. Yet it proved unable or unwilling to ensure that deaths from starvation did not occur within part of its jurisdiction. It is clear that there was a degree of indifference to Irish distress which reflected a conviction that the resulting economic and social changes would ultimately be beneficial. This view was starkly demonstrated in the report of the 1851 Census Commissioners:

"In conclusion, we feel it will be gratifying to your Excellency to find that, although the population has been diminished in so remarkable a manner by famine, disease and emigration between 1841 and 1851, and has been since decreasing, the results of the Irish Census of 1851 are, on the whole, satisfactory, demonstrating as they do the general advancement of the country."

15. While charges of "holocaust" or "genocide" cannot be sustained, the official response to the famine displayed a degree of insensitivity, indifference, parsimony and rigid adherence to prevailing economic doctrines which greatly accentuated the effects of a natural disaster.

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HISTORIANS AND THE FAMINE

1. Despite its historical importance and its place in the nationalist pantheon of British wrongs in Ireland, there has been comparatively little examination of the famine by Irish historians until recent times. Early accounts, from the late 19th and early 20th Centuries were largely anecdotal and based on folk memory. As such, they tended to perpetuate nationalist myths of British injustice, sometimes even talking in terms of a deliberate policy of extermination or genocide. This view of the famine survives today only among less well informed Irish Americans.

2. In recent times, historical examination of the famine has been caught up in the wider dispute between "revisionists" and "counter-revisionists". Revisionists consciously set out to write "objective" history, which has often led them to play down, or dismiss altogether, traditional nationalist interpretations of key events in Irish history. In the case of the famine, three propositions at variance with the traditional view, characterise the revisionist standpoint:

- that the famine was not a watershed in Irish economic, social and demographic development, but merely accelerated existing trends;

- that, given Irish over-population and agricultural under-development, a subsistence crisis was inevitable;

- that, while not absolving them from criticism, the British Governments, judged by the standards of the time, did more or less all that could have been expected of them.

3. In the most recent writings on the famine, there has been something of a reaction to the revisionist view, which has tended to re-emphasise the uniqueness of the famine, in terms of duration, severity and long-term consequences, as well adopting a much more critical view of the response of the British authorities. Prominent recent exponents of the revisionist view include Roy Foster and George Boyce. Leading counter-revisionists include two of the current Irish famine specialists, Cormac O Grada and, most critical of all, Christine Kinealy, while a third, Mary Daly, inclines to the revisionist view. A particular point of difference is whether or not the Government could and should have restricted food exports from Ireland during the famine. Foster and Daly maintain that this would have been neither possible nor effective. Kinealy takes the opposite view.

4. A selection of quotes from these and some others is attached. Kinealy predominates in the selection, because hers is the most extensive recent analysis of the role of British governments during the famine.

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HISTORIANS AND THE IRISH FAMINE

Christine Kinealy: "This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52"

"The reaction of the British authorities to the shortages within Ireland for the crucial factor in the context of famine relief. It was patently inadequate. To nationalists, the response of the government has provided a profound example of calculated landlord and British oppression, culminating in an inadequate response to a starving people. This view has been largely discredited in recent years. Nonetheless, popular perceptions and easily memorable shibboleths have continued to reinforce this monolithic image. However, throughout the famine, there was considerable diversity among relief officials regarding the provision of relief. During the latter years of the famine, a major division within the government machinery was apparent, which reflected divergent views on the type and quantity of relief to be given to Ireland. The advice of those who argued that more financial assistance was necessary to reduce mortality was repeatedly ignored. Edward Twistleton, the Chief Poor Law Commissioner, eventually resigned in frustration at the frugal policies being pursued by the government; however, Charles Trevelyan, Permanent Secretary at the Treasury and advocate of ever-increasing parsimony, received a knighthood at the beginning of 1848, when the famine had officially been designated as over, even though the demand for relief, the rate of emigration and mortality levels were still rising."

"The challenge posed by the famine could have been met successfully and many of its worst excesses avoided, had the political will to do so existed."

"The British government viewed its role in the relief operations of 1845-6 as it had done on earlier occasions, that is, as stimulating, directing and supporting but not superseding the duties of local landlords. They were anxious that the whole burden of relief should not be thrown upon them, when it rightfully should be performed by the landowners of Ireland. Everyone involved in the provision of relief agreed on this point. Charles Trevelyan, who was Permanent Secretary at the Treasury during the whole of the famine period, repeatedly warned the officers involved in providing relief of the dangers of allowing Irish landlords and large farmers to abdicate their duty and instead throw the burden on the public purse."

"Excessive mortality was probably inevitable, given the extent of the shortfall in food following the 1846 blight. However, the tardy, frugal, short-sighted and ideologically-bound policies adopted by the Whig administration made inevitable the slide from distress to the national calamity of famine."

"In early September 1846, the Irish Executive warned the government that intervention in the affairs of Ireland was imperative "to save the people from starvation". In London, there

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was less consensus about the impact of a second year of blight. Although there was some support for more extensive State investment in public works, these were overshadowed by the more popular policy suggested by the political economists, including Charles Wood and Charles Trevelyan at the Treasury. The philosophy of non-intervention, which underpinned political economy, stressed that, during a period of shortage or famine, it was the responsibility of a local area, aided by private charity, to alleviate the situation. In the short-term, the government's commitment to non-intervention might appear cruel but, as the *Times* pointed out, "there are times when something like harshness is the greatest humanity". Furthermore, the political economists had the satisfaction of believing that, in the long-term, adherence to this policy would facilitate the economic development of Ireland."

"The government viewed it as their moral responsibility to use the failure of the potato crop in 1846 to force economic change within Ireland, including the capitalisation of the Irish agricultural sector.

"Trevelyan thought that even limited interference by the government disturbed the natural balance of supply and demand. He was confident that "the natural adjustments which take place under a system of perfectly free trade are always more than sufficient to counteract any inconveniences arising from such a system." Russell confirmed the allegiance of the Whig government to a policy of non-interference as far as possible in the provision of food, on the grounds that "the interference of the State deadens private energy, prevents forethought, and, after superseding all other exertion, finds itself at least unequal to the gigantic task which it has undertaken".

"With regard to the provision of Indian corn by the Peel government, the new Whig government believed that a dangerous precedent had been established in the previous year. It had not been the intention of Peel's government to feed the distressed people, but rather to keep the price of food down and provide a stimulus to private trade, but the success of the scheme created an expectation that the government would again supply food but on an even larger scale. Russell had no intention of allowing his government to repeat this experiment and stated unequivocally: "It must be thoroughly understood that we cannot feed the people. It was a cruel delusion to pretend to do so."

"Regardless of the fact that the policies being pursued by the government were inadequate, the government refused to deviate from its chosen course. At this stage, a short-term solution such as placing a temporary embargo on exports from Ireland or purchasing additional supplies in the markets used by the private merchants could have been introduced to provide immediate assistance to Ireland. But the government refused to do so. Instead, the government chose to adhere to a policy of either limited (in the west of Ireland) or total (in the east of Ireland) non-interference."

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"At the beginning of 1847, the government announced a major change of policy. It had two basic components. In the short-term, people in the western counties of Ireland needed food. This was to be provided through soup kitchens which were to be introduced in the spring and summer of 1847. They were to provide relief directly in the form of food, usually soup. In the longer-term, labour and relief were to be separated. Public works and other temporary measures were no longer to be the main means of providing relief. Instead, the permanent system of poor relief in Ireland, the Poor Law, was to be extended to meet any future demands. By doing this, a greater responsibility for the provision of relief was to be placed on the localities through the administrative unit of the Poor Law unions."

"In a report in the *Times* in March 1847, the Irish people were described as "a people born and bred from time immemorial, in inveterate indolence, improvidence, disorder and consequent destitution". Such reports had an impact on parliamentary and public opinion. Much of the information upon which these accounts were based was supplied by Wood and Trevelyan.

"Despite the evidence of overwhelming distress, Russell's government was unwilling to introduce any measures which went against current economic orthodoxies or that would upset the powerful lobby opposed to giving any additional relief to Ireland."

"The Treasury, under the direction of Trevelyan, regarded it as of the utmost importance that charges which rightly belonged on the local rates should not be thrown on the national funds. He commanded the Lord Lieutenant to confine "within the narrowest possible limits" the advances authorised by him for the support of the poor in workhouses whether in food or money".

"Notwithstanding the financial difficulties of the unions in all parts of the country in the early months of 1847, the government was determined that the Poor Law should become almost exclusively responsible for providing relief after August 1847. A change was necessary, and the government was determined any new relief policies would facilitate change within Ireland, rather than perpetuate the existing faults evident in Irish society. Leading members of the Whig administration favoured a relief policy that would increase self-reliance of the people and force the landlords to realise that property had its duties as well as its rights. The Poor Law, with its emphasis on local chargeability and union responsibility, was regarded as an ideal mechanism for facilitating these changes. The extended Poor Law, therefore, was regarded not merely as an agent for the provision of relief, but also as a catalyst for facilitating important economic and social improvements in Ireland. The fact that the Poor Law was proving unequal to the demands made on it in the early part of 1847 did not deter the government from a determination to make it the primary agency for providing relief following the harvest of that year. In pursuing this policy, the government chose to ignore the fact that some Poor Law unions were already facing bankruptcy.

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The Whig administration had decided that local resources were to bear the responsibility for financing local poverty, regardless of the ability of these resources to meet the new demands.

"The decision by the government to introduce soup kitchens had generally been praised by historians for being both innovative and successful. In the short-term, there is no doubt that soup kitchens did provide an effective form of relief to a massive number of persons."

"The third consecutive year of famine distress coincided with an extension of the Treasury's role. This reinforced the view that any on-going distress was a local problem, to be resolved locally, with a further distancing of the central government from the provision of relief. At the same time, there was a renewed emphasis on restructuring of agriculture. The strengthened position of Wood and Trevelyan in the Treasury and a general lack of sympathy in Britain for Irish distress facilitated the enactment of a significantly more rigorous approach to relief policy. Central to this was an increasing focus on the Poor Law and its institutions as the most important mechanism for forcing the local rates to pay for the local impact of the famine.

"The transfer to Poor Law relief in August 1847 marked an end to the various temporary measures which had been employed by the government with varying degrees of success in the previous two years. By making relief a local charge, the government was able to realise the long-held aspiration that "Irish property should support Irish poverty".

"Trevelyan was a vociferous advocate of transferring financial burden for relief to the Poor Law. Trevelyan, a disciple of both Adam Smith and Edmund Burke, sent copies of their writings to relief officers in Ireland, recommending them to read them when sick or on holiday. Like Smith and Burke, he regarded gratuitous relief during a period of sustained distress as having a demoralising effect on the recipients. He believed that the only way to bring this dependence to an end was by making local landlords financially responsible for providing relief and, at the same time, to make relief so unpalatable that only the genuinely destitute would avail of it. In his book, "The Irish Crisis"; published in 1848, Trevelyan accused the Irish landlords of selfishness, neglect and apathy. The transfer of Poor Law relief would end this dereliction of duty and force them to realise that property had its duty as well as its rights.

"Trevelyan explained that limited financial assistance was necessary if the economy of Ireland was ever to be reformed, because: "the change from an idle, barbarous, isolated potato cultivation to corn cultivation, which frees industry and binds together employer and employee in mutually-beneficial relations, requires capital and a new class of men".

"The transfer to Poor Relief coincided with an apparent hardening in the attitude of some British officials towards Irish distress. Within the British government there was a general

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consensus that, after two years of distress and financial dependence on the state, a firm resolve was required to force the Irish people to depend on their own resources.

"During the early months of 1848, the relationship between the Poor Law Commissioners in Dublin and the Treasury in London deteriorated considerably. As the year progressed, the personal relationship between Trevelyan and Twistleton drew increasingly fraught. Twistleton, supported by the members of the Irish executive, was concerned that the Poor Law alone did not possess the financial resources to provide the relief necessary. He believed that, if the government continued to insist that local rates must support local poverty, they were running a risk of increased deaths from starvation. To officials within the Treasury, however, the success of the Poor Law depended on enforcement of the collection of rates.

"The government, and public opinion in Britain, was committed to the idea of local Irish taxes maintaining the Irish local poor, considering it "inexpedient that the poor of Ireland should again be maintained from the public purse".

"The Treasury, in command of both policy and resources, pursued its own vision of the improvement of Ireland. Underpinning this was a strong conviction that God's purpose, with the help of the political economists, was to be served by forcing the inadequacies of the poorest parts of Ireland to be met from within their own resources."

"The main ideological battleground became the Treasury in London and the Poor Law Commissioners in Dublin, led on one side by the officious and doctrinaire Charles Trevelyan and, on the other, by the increasingly doubtful Edward Twistleton. But if Twistleton was losing his faith in the policies of the British government towards Ireland, Trevelyan remained convinced that the policy of minimal government interference had the support of an even higher authority: God, he believed, had ordained the famine to teach the Irish people a lesson, and the machinations of man should not seek to reduce the effects of such a lesson."

"Twistleton, the Chief Poor Law Commissioner, despite being a fervent supporter of the Act of Union, was a strong critic of the government's approach to famine relief. In his view, where the local poor rates proved to be inadequate for the provision of relief, it was the responsibility of the state to provide additional financial assistance. Following his resignation in 1849, he made a number of criticisms of government policy: 'I wish to remark that it is wholly unnecessary that there should be a single death from starvation this year in the distressed unions in Ireland. The machinery for the administration of relief is now tolerably complete and all that is requisite is that the necessary funds should be furnished to those that are entrusted for the administration of relief'."

"Increasingly, the successive relief policies introduced by the British government were intended not merely to provide

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assistance to urgent cases of distress but also to help bring about a long-term transformation of the Irish economy. The social and economic dislocation evident during the years of distress was regarded as an opportunity to bring about changes in the Irish economy and facilitate its transformation into a more streamlined capitalist society. Eviction, emigration and high mortality were part of the price to be paid. For the British government and some of its agents, determined to use the famine as an opportunity to bring about these changes in Ireland, this price did not appear to be too high."

"The onset of the famine was unexpected, although partial crop failures and food shortages were not unusual. In 1845, therefore, the potato blight, regardless of the lack of understanding of either its origins or an antidote, was not regarded with undue alarm. Although approximately 50% of the main subsistence crop failed in 1845-6, the consequence of the resultant shortages was not famine, nor did emigration or mortality increase substantially. The role played by the government, local landlords, clerics and various relief officials was significant in achieving this outcome. The second, more widespread, blight of 1848 marked the real beginning of the famine. The government responded to this potentially more serious situation by reducing its involvement in the import of food into the country and by making relief more difficult to obtain. The distress that followed the 1847 harvest was caused by a small crop and economic dislocation, rather than the widespread appearance of blight. The government again changed its relief policy in an attempt to force local resources to support the starving poor within their districts. The government professed a believe that this policy was necessary to ensure that a burden, which it chose to regard as essentially local, should not be forced upon the national finances. This policy underpinned the actions of the government for the remainder of the famine. The relief of famine was regarded essentially as a local responsibility rather than a national one, let alone an Imperial obligation. The special relationship between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom forged by the Act of Union appeared not to extend to periods of shortage and famine."

"The policies of the government and the way in which it perceived its role are crucial to an understanding of the famine years. The changing perceptions and strategies of the British government determined the type of relief provided and the methods and timing of its allocation. The role played by the Treasury was critical. Charles Wood, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, together with his colleague, Charles Trevelyan, represented a school of economic orthodoxy which advocated both non-intervention and fiscal rectitude. A populist version of their views found a wider audience in the columns of the *The Times* and the cartoons of *Punch*."

"There can be no doubt that, despite a short-term cyclical depression, the combined resources of the United Kingdom could either completely or much more substantially have removed the consequences of consecutive years of potato blight in Ireland. If

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the measure of success is judged by the crudest yet most telling of all measures - that of mortality - the British government failed a large proportion of the population in terms of humanitarian criteria."

"Despite overwhelming evidence of prolonged distress caused by successive years of potato blight, the underlying philosophy of the relief efforts was that they should be kept to a minimalist level; in fact, they actually decreased as the famine progressed. A number of relief officials employed the theories of Adam Smith and other leading political economists to justify minimal interference, or even non-intervention, in the market on the grounds that it contained a self-adjusting mechanism. The consequences of this policy were disastrous. Insufficient food was imported into the country and no restrictions were put on food leaving Ireland. Furthermore, the delay in opening the food depots left some of the population without access to any food for a number of weeks; and, even after the depots had opened, the government insistence that corn should not be sold below the market price placed is beyond the reach even of those in receipt of cash wages from the public works. This change of policy, and a dogmatic adherence to it, marked the true beginning of the famine."

"The closing of ports during period of shortages in order to keep home-grown food for domestic consumption had, on earlier occasions, proved to be an effective way of staving off famine within Ireland. By refusing to allow a similar policy in 1846-7, the British government ensured that "Black '47" was indelibly associated with suffering, famine, mortality, emigration and, to some, mis-rule."

"The response of Russell's government to the famine combined opportunism, arrogance and cynicism deployed in such a way as to facilitate the long-standing ambition to secure a reform of Ireland's economy."

"In the 1840s, the policy of the British government was shaped by a prevailing economic dogma, inspired by a particular interpretation of free market economics. In the context of providing poor relief in Ireland, this influential philosophy decreed that ultimately such relief was damaging and that genuine improvements could only be achieved through self-help. In its more extreme form, the principles embodied in this dogma denied any government responsibility for the alleviation of distress."

"The British government chose to use the famine as a means of facilitating and imposing their own reforms. The famine provided a unique opportunity to bring about long-term structural changes in Ireland's agrarian sector. During the latter part of the famine, notably following the transfer of relief to local responsibility through the mechanism of the Poor Law in the autumn of 1847, the hidden agenda of reform is increasingly apparent. The government was able to use the chaos by the famine to facilitate a number of social and economic changes. In particular, it took the opportunity to bring about a more

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commercial system of farming within Ireland which no longer would offer refuge to a variety of non-productive elements whether landless labourers or apathetic landlords."

"To achieve its ultimate aims, the government's strategy was based on two underlying principles: that of issuing the minimal amount of relief consistent with political acceptability; and that of imposing the maximum possible burden on local resources in order to force a restructuring of Irish agriculture."

"The response of the British government to the famine was inadequate in terms of humanitarian criteria and, increasingly after 1847, systematically and deliberately so. The localised shortages that followed the blight of 1845 were adequately dealt with, but, as the shortages became more widespread, the government retrenched. With the short-lived exception of the soup kitchens, access to relief became more restricted."

"There was no shortage of resources to avoid the tragedy of the famine. Within Ireland itself, there were substantial resources of food which, had the political will existed, could have been diverted, even as a short-term measure, to supply a starving people. Instead, the government pursued the objective of economic, social and agrarian reform as a long-term aim, although the price paid for this ultimately elusive goal was privation, disease, emigration, mortality and an enduring legacy of disenchantment."

Mary Daly: "Revisionism and Irish history: The Great Famine"

"The charge most consistently levelled against the British government in many older accounts is not one concerning the adequacy of the relief measures adopted, which tends to dominate much of the more recent debate, but the failure to prevent the export of food from Ireland. The extreme variant of the nationalist viewpoint assumes that closing the Irish ports, together with a scheme of public works financed from Irish resources, would have been fully capable of meeting the famine crisis."

"Criticism is frequently voiced of the failure of the British government to directly intervene in the food market in 1846, but the sheer size of the task and the fact that it would undoubtedly have led to a boycott of the food trade by private traders made such an action of limited effectiveness."

"Most writers have attributed major responsibility for both Irish poverty and the famine disaster to the free trade, market-driven approach which had, by the 1840s, come to dominate the British economy."

"Trevelyan's 'The Irish Crisis' regarded pre-famine Ireland as poor, backward and under-developed, with famine as virtually inevitable; once more the land system and specifically Irish landlords were seen as the culprits. The solution was seen as lying in full exposure to the liberal market economy which would

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weed out incompetent landlords and indolent peasants alike, replacing them with a modern capitalist agriculture."

"The key revisionist contribution, "The Great Famine", edited by R D Edwards and T D Williams, tended to replace the previous picture of "great and deliberately imposed evil in high positions of responsibility" with one characterised by "human limitation and timidity".

"Raymond Crotty's analysis dethroned the famine from its position as the pivotal economic event in 19th century Ireland in favour of the Battle of Waterloo. According to Crotty, trends which were generally associated with post-famine Ireland, such as the shift to pasture farming and the end of sub-division for all established after 1815. Crotty presented the famine as an almost inevitable outcome for a society unable to respond to rapidly changing market circumstances."

"Recent research has re-established both the magnitude of the famine and its longer-term economic significance. The Irish famine constituted the most severe episode of food shortage in 19th century Europe."

"While a ban on Irish food exports would not have compensated for losses in the potato crop, the grain crop of 1846, if entirely retained in Ireland, could have made an appreciable gap between the destruction of the potato crop in August and the arrival of the first maize cargo the following winter."

"The regressive burden of poor relief, with the poorest areas carrying the heaviest poor rates, undoubtedly delayed economic recovery, particularly in the west. The tax burden crippled larger farmers in these areas, causing some to emigrate, with possible long-term damage to the social fabric. The argument that the British government was ungenerous to Ireland during the famine seems much stronger for the years after mid-1847 than for any other period."

"Current consensus sees a greater measure of continuity between pre- and post-famine Ireland in demographic matters, such as marriages, births and emigration, than was the case in the past. In economic terms, the famine status as a watershed has been firmly restored. The famine administered a serious long-term shock to Irish agriculture. Irish agriculture shifted from tillage to pasture."

"The strongest belief in the famine as an act of providence originated, not in superstitious peasant Ireland, but among significant numbers of the English political and administrative relief: a group which included both Peel, Russell and Trevelyan."

"Moral, pre-destination analysis underlay much of early 19th century political economy, ie the belief that the invisible hand of the market economy reflected the working of divine providence and that measures which thwarted its functioning were inherently evil."

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"Modern research tends to question the differentiation between the pragmatic Peel and the dogmatic Russell. Both, in fact, shared broadly similar ideological values. Peel was lucky to confront the relatively milder famine of 1845-6."

"According to providentialist theory, Irish rural society, as exemplified by cottiers and other small landholders and slipshod, easy-living landlords, had to give way to a modern, commercial farming system ruled by profit and worked by wage-earning labourers. To those who subscribed to providentialism, such as Trevelyan, the famine was 'the judgment of God on an indolent and unself-reliant people'; as God had 'sent the calamity to teach the Irish a lesson, that calamity must not be too much mitigated'."

"Many key facts are clear: the Irish famine was real, not artificial, food was extremely scarce; it could not have been solved by closing the ports; charges of genocide cannot be sustained. However, it is undoubtedly the case the the British response was inadequate and was unduly influenced both by domestic political concerns, such as repeal of the corn laws and by providentialism."

"If we wish to criticise government relief measures, their inaction after 1847 offers perhaps the most obvious target. By comparison the crisis in the autumn of 1846 was unexpected and unprecedented in scale; no government however humane and enlightened could have coped adequately. More could have been done to save lives during that terrible year, but responsibility does not lie solely with the government...It is easy to be wise after the event."

Roy Foster: "Modern Ireland: 1600-1972"

"Traditionally, the famine was seen as a watershed in Irish history, creating new conditions of demographic decline, large-scale emigration, altered farming structured and new economic policies, not to mention an institutionalised Anglophobia among the Irish at home and abroad. As a literal analysis, this does not stand up to examination: at least as far as the supposed economic effects are concerned, all these processes can be traced to well before the famine, even if the disaster accelerated them to a level where they became qualitatively different.

"There had been 14 partial or complete potato famines in Ireland between 1816 and 1842, and some catastrophic crises in the 18th century, notably 1740-1. From the autumn of 1845, a new fungus disease struck the Irish potato, reducing the crop to rotteness. The blight redoubled in 1846, preventing a new crop being sown. In 1847, incidents of the disease declined, but it returned in 1848-9. The result, in areas where the labouring population was dependent on a potato diet, was a subsistence crisis that was beyond the powers either of the existing state apparatus or the prevalent conceptions of social responsibility - in Ireland at least.

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"In the Belgian famine of 1867, the government unwillingly purchased food for distribution, as well as organising public works and removing tariffs. The initial British reaction in 1845-6 was not much different, though policies fluctuated more, and the time-lag in putting them into effect was potentially fatal. The idea that food produced in the country should not be exported was not adopted anywhere, and would have been considered an economic irrelevance at the time. It would also have required the assumption of power that no contemporary government possessed and inevitably caused violent resistance among the farmer classes.

"Fundamentally, relief was up to government initiative; and this, in the long run, was not up to the challenge. Peel's policies in 1846 were more effective than sometimes allowed. The government coordinated relief measures through public works and price control. But government machinery embodied the usual ad hoc response to Irish differences; it was not capable of bearing the unprecedentedly huge weight. Within both the government and the Treasury, humanitarian impulses came up against a violent disapproval of subsidies improvement schemes; there was also an attitude, often unconcealed, that Irish fecklessness and lack of economy were bringing a retribution that would work out for the best in the end.

"Under the Peel dispensation, food depots were set up and prices kept down by the distribution of Indian meals. However, obsessive, contemporary theories about keeping private traders in business and only distributing food to the unemployable interfered with the system's effectiveness.

"Much retrospective condemnation has been heaped upon Trevelyan's shoulders as Permanent Head of the Treasury and final arbiter of famine relief policy; in fact he simply epitomises the Whigg view of economic theory, as did Wood and Russell. They monitored Irish affairs after Peel fell from power in 1846; only Russell knew Ireland at first hand. Under the new dispensation, government intervention was to be strictly limited; private initiative must be relied on to provide food wherever possible, with the result that prices soared to levels that the wages paid by the public works could not meet. Government policies were by no means passive, and certainly not careless; but they were generally ill-founded."

The question of payment became an obsession. If this burden fell on local rates, it was expected to produce a widespread commitment to 'efficiency'. The twin obsession was with the dangers of pauperisation on the supposed scale of the old Poor Law in England. Public works were not abandoned in favour of direct relief until 1847. Soup kitchens distributed food to millions by late 1847. But they were unable to cope with the conditions of a bitter winter and ravaging disease.

"The burden on the rates from the Poor Law was unenforceable, given the limited resources of Irish property. Central government was locked in a permanent struggle with the local Boards of Guardians. The Poor Law Extension Act of 1847 restricted

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admittance and incorporated the Gregory Clause, which denied relief to anyone possessing any more than a quarter acre of land; this boosted the landlord desiderate of land clearance and emigration, and has been credited with disintegrating the fabric of rural society. This position reflected the contemporary analysis of the Irish poverty problem, which was assumed to form the background to the famine. This was that "the two great deficiencies in Ireland are want of capital and want of industry. By destroying small tenancies you would obtain both".

"In Scotland, which also saw widespread crop failure, the principal difference in what subsequently happened was that landlords were able to help feed their tenants and generally did so. For the most part, the same was not true in Ireland.

"The government, by and large, adhered to their belief that private enterprise should provide the bulk of the food supplies; hardly anyone supported the idea that the government itself should enter the market.

"The famine produced an abiding resentment of "England". Whether an Irish parliament and government would have articulated a different approach to the famine is an open question; but they would certainly have behaved more efficiently. Moreover, English governmental attitudes exposed the illogic and double-think of Union: when a rate-in-aid was finally imposed in 1850 to distribute the burden, it was imposed on Ireland alone, not throughout Britain. Where the terms of the Union might unduly disadvantage Britain, they were tacitly ignored.

"...the removal of the one means of sustenance meant a sentence of death for those trapped in the subsistence economy of the west and south-west...Need this have been so? The reactions of government policy, constrained by the economic ideology of the day, were by modern standards inadequate: the self-congratulatory hard line of laissez faire economists makes chilling reading nowadays. If Peel's early measures - creating public works, pegging prices and distributing food - were more or less effective ones, his successor, Lord John Russell, adhered to free-market dogmas which attempt, hopelessly, to - at very best - place the burden on Irish property rather than state hand-outs. And this was never feasible. Poor Law Boards were inadequate in terms of resources and powers."

D George Boyce: "19th Century Ireland".

"Early Victorian governments were not in the business of providing state support on any considerable scale, and certainly not enough to cope with the Irish famine; the age of laissez faire was not the age of the welfare state. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to imply that the state saw itself simply neutral or non-interventionist in its essential character; laissez faire was an aspiration rather than a reality, and the government was in fact aware of its need to play some sort of role in mitigating the disaster. The problem lay in defining exactly what role it should endeavour to play. It was felt, however, that Irish landlords

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should bear the main burden of relief.

"While the relief institutions looked sound on paper, they proved badly wanting in practice.

"It was the British government's attitude which was to come under the closest scrutiny by posterity. And not only by posterity; there were contemporaries in the House of Commons who pleaded for a massive injection of official funds for famine relief.

Sir Robert Peel, like many British Ministers responsible for the government of Ireland, regarded that country with a mixture of scepticism and a sense of duty. He went further than contemporary orthodoxy dictated and set up food depots, with secretly purchased Indian maize. This, and the local relief works, were largely successful, but they were overtaken by the worsening crisis and the fall of Peel's government in the summer of 1846 coincided with the second, more devastating, outbreak of the potato blight.

The guiding hand in the government's response to the Irish famine was that of Sir Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to the Treasury. Trevelyan harboured ambiguous attitudes towards Ireland, as he did towards Scotland. The peoples of both countries were, in his view, Celts, members of an inferior and indolent race, who might yet be saved for civilisation through the lessons of famine and prolonged intercourse with the more advanced Anglo-Saxon society.

Trevelyan was determined to ensure that state intervention would not undermine the principle that the government's purpose was to help local effort, not to supplant it. Nevertheless, the state found itself going much further in the case of Ireland than it did in Scotland, and it became an administrator of a huge famine relief operation. Soup kitchens were opened in the spring of 1847 and, in June, a separate Irish Poor Law Commission was set up and put in charge of further assistance under the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act, which empowered boards of guardians to grant outdoor relief. The new government also continued the policy of state support for public works, commenced under Peel.

There have been claims that the whole episode of the famine was a kind of British-generated holocaust, a deliberate effort by the British government to allow Ireland to starve. The government accepted, in 1847, however, that a high proportion of the Irish population must be fed without charge and without entering the workhouse.

There was no specifically anti-Irish feeling behind government policy, though there was a sense that indeed this disaster, like its Scotland equivalent, had been brought by the people upon themselves as a result of their backward way of life. However, against this must be set the awareness that the government's duty was to save life, and not to adopt a policy of detachment: there was never at any time an acceptance or even a suggestion that the

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Irish or the Scots should be left to starve.

In both England and Ireland, writers shared a common view of the famine as a kind of deliberate act of genocide. This view has been refuted by most of modern Irish historians, who see the Russell government as unable to free itself from the economic orthodoxy of the day. The genocide theory is utterly without historical justification. The British government was determined to save as many of the people as it reasonably could - though not at too high a cost. From mid-1847, it was convinced that it had done enough for Ireland, and left the Irish Poor Law Commission to cope. And it did see Ireland not as an integral, but (like Scotland) as a rather remote and certainly different part of the United Kingdom: as a backward land set in unprofitable and obscurantist ways of life and thought. In this sense, the famine revealed that the United Kingdom was a political convenience rather than a genuine political concept.

Cormac O Grada: "The Great Famine and Today's Famines"

"Even the most Thatcherite of European politicians today would be deemed 'wet' if compared to some of those with power and influence in Westminster during the famine. There is some truth, then, in the claim that in the 1840s 'Ireland died of political economy'."

"...the enduring, populist image of the famine as starvation when there was enough food to go round over-simplifies. It ignores the sheer gravity of the potato failure...dwelling on the exported grain ignores the reality that during the famine grain exports were dwarfed by imports of cheaper grain...but more could have been done ...in late 1846 and early 1847 by buying up and redistributing domestic stocks..."

"Ireland's catastrophe was the product of three factors: a backward economy, bad luck and ideology..."