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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 (93–33), Ireland (845–52), and Bengal (943)—to explore famine not merely as a humanitarian crisis, but as a strategic instrument of imperial demographic engineering. Through 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 impact on 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

"Famine is not a natural phenomenon. It is the result of political decisions and structural violence." – Amartya Sen

Mass famines in agrarian societies are not only humanitarian catastrophes, but also acute manifestations of global political and economic processes. In the 20th and 9th centuries, they arose not in conditions of a complete lack of resources, but in the context of imperial reforms, collectivization, colonial modernization, and grain exports. They were the result of decisions made at the top of power and affected millions of human lives.

This study focuses on three major famines that unfolded within agrarian societies during periods of crisis transformation: Soviet Kazakhstan (93–933), colonial Ireland (845–852), and British Bengal (943). These tragedies, despite their temporal and geographical separation, have striking structural similarities: systemic

food exports, suppression of local autonomy, erasure of traditional ways of life, and massive demographic losses.

Today, as migration flows, food chains, and postcolonial traumas once again become the subject of global debate, comparing these three stories allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how empires managed life and death through food. Analyzing these events helps us rethink the categories of "natural" and "artificial" in famine, and to identify the biopolitical scenarios behind seemingly "natural" disasters.

The work is based on comparative methodology and a rich archival base, including censuses, emigration reports and political documents. For the first time in one study, the demographic consequences of three major famines are combined, understood in the logic of transnational history. Particular attention is paid to cultural memory, migration consequences and ethno-demographic shifts that determined the fate of peoples for decades to come.

Relevance of the Study

The contemporary political and humanitarian agenda increasingly returns to the topic of famine – both in the context of food security and in the context of historical memory. In the 2st century, when the world is again faced with mass forced migrations, resource distribution crises, and disasters caused by management decisions, understanding the historical experience of famine is becoming especially important.

Comparative studies of the Irish, Kazakh, and Bengal famines are important not only for clarifying demographic impacts, but also as a way of identifying universal political mechanisms through which food is transformed into an instrument of power. In addition, understanding cultural memory and identities formed through trauma has implications for understanding contemporary diasporas, national narratives, and the global politics of recognition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic of famine has long attracted the attention of historians, demographers, and memory researchers. Classic works by Drèze & Sen (989), Cormac Ó Gráda (2009), and Mike Davis (2000) have provided a framework for interpreting famine as a socio-economic and political phenomenon. Works by Cameron (208), Mukerjee (200), and Pianciola (200; 2004) have deepened our understanding of famines in the Soviet and British empires, focusing on the institutional role of the state in escalating the crisis.

Historiography on Ireland emphasizes the role of imperialist economics and unfair distribution of resources (Kelleher, Moore, Fay), while studies on India emphasize the strategic militarization of food chains during World War II. Of particular importance for Kazakhstan are the latest archival publications and the works of S. Cameron, who was the first to systematically draw attention to the specifics of nomadic society in the context of collectivization policies.

Identifying a Research Gap

Despite the active development of individual cases, historiography lacks a comprehensive comparative analysis of the three largest famines in agrarian societies of the 9th–20th centuries—as events embedded in 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 factor in the formation of diasporas, and the basis of cultural memory.

Our paper fills this gap by offering a comparison of the Kazakh, Irish, and Indian famines as forms of politically determined demographic shocks embedded in state/empire logics. It also provides the first comprehensive examination of the identity and cultural implications of these famines in a transnational context.

Scientific Novelty of the Research

This article offers the first systematic comparative analysis of three major famines in 9th- and 20th-century agrarian societies – Kazakhstan (93–33), Ireland (845–52), and Bengal (943) – in the context of imperial policies, demographic transformations, and the formation of cultural memory. Unlike most existing studies, which focus primarily on a single regional case, this study examines these events as interrelated instances of structural violence aimed at subordinating and reshaping peripheral communities within larger political systems (the USSR and the British Empire).

The scientific novelty of the work is manifested in the following aspects:

Comparative Approach: For the first time, a single study examines three historically and geographically distant episodes of mass famine to identify common mechanisms of political and demographic influence.

1. ***Conceptualizing the "politics of hunger"*** as a strategic instrument in the imperial governance of agrarian societies - with an emphasis on the deliberate admission of disaster, rather than its accident.

2. ***Introduction of the category of demographic design:*** examines how mass famine changed the ethnic composition, migration patterns, fertility and family patterns of the population.
3. ***Analysis of cultural memory and identity formation:*** It shows how the traumatic events of the famine become the basis of the national narrative and collective consciousness of the Kazakhs, Irish and Indians.
4. ***Drawing on a wide range of archival and visual sources*** (including telegrams, reports, statistics, eyewitness accounts), a significant portion of which had not previously been considered in a comparative context.

Thus, the work offers a new interpretation of the phenomenon of famine – not only as a humanitarian catastrophe, but also as an institutionalized mechanism of social transformation, controlled through food, demographic and political parameters.

Purpose of the study

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

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the features of collectivization and export policy of the USSR in Kazakhstan as a factor that caused the demographic collapse in 93–933.
2. To examine the Irish Great Famine (845–852) as a form of structural violence by the British Empire and its impact on global migration.
3. To examine the Bengal famine of 943 as a result of colonial food policies exacerbated by the military circumstances of World War II.
4. Compare the mechanisms of political control through food in different imperial regimes.
5. To identify the demographic consequences of famines: mortality rates, changes in birth rates, internal and external migrations, ethno-social shifts.
6. To analyze how the memory of the famine shaped cultural identity and political consciousness in the respective national communities.
7. To contribute to the development of the theory of biopolitics and demographic management in the context of world history.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study takes a transnational and comparative approach that allows us to view the phenomenon of famine not as a local exception, but as a structural element of world history, embedded in imperial, demographic, and economic processes. This approach is consistent with the mission of the Journal of World History, which emphasizes the importance of cross-cutting and global processes in the transformation of societies.

To achieve the objectives of the study, the following sources were used:

1. **National Censuses**: Kazakh SSR (926, 939), Ireland (84, 85, 9, 926), British India (93, 94, 95);
2. **Emigration Registers and Passenger Lists**: Irish Famine Passenger Files (846–85), British and Canadian ports, US and Australian immigration services;
3. **Colonial and State Reports**: materials of the Bengal Famine Commission (943–945), Soviet party telegrams and reports of regional bodies, reports of governors and commissioners;
4. **International Data**: statistical summaries of the League of Nations and the United Nations on migration, food and demographic change.

From a methodological point of view, the work combines quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis:

1. **Quantitative:** demographic analysis (mortality, birth rate, migration), ethno-demographic statistics, construction of time series, comparison of population change dynamics;
2. **Qualitative:** interpretation of archival materials, criticism of political and colonial documents, discourse analysis of official statements and press reports, use of visual sources (photographs, maps, diagrams).

This interdisciplinary combination allows us not only to establish the scale of demographic transformations, but also to identify the political and institutional mechanisms through which famine was transformed into a controlled instrument.

Kazakhstan (930–933): Collectivization as a Tool for the Formation of Export-Oriented Reactions in the USSR

In the early 930s, Kazakhstan found itself at 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 sedentary agriculture dominated, Kazakhstan had a unique socio-economic structure: more than 60% of the population were nomads or semi-nomads, and the livestock system provided their main means of subsistence.

The decision to implement collectivization in such conditions was not only economic but also ideological. It was part of a broader strategy to transform the USSR into an industrial power by mobilizing agricultural resources for export – in particular, grain and meat – in order to obtain foreign currency to purchase industrial equipment abroad. Thus, collectivization in Kazakhstan became an instrument not just of agrarian transformation, but a mechanism for implementing the foreign economic objectives of the Soviet state.

The violent nature of the transformations was manifested in the methods applied to nomadic households: mass confiscation of livestock, forced resettlement, destruction of the tribal organization, as well as repression against the "baystvo" – the traditional elite. By 93, according to the Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, more than 80% of all livestock, the main source of food and exchange, had been confiscated.

Table 1. Dynamics of livestock reduction in Kazakhstan (930–932)

Type of cattle	930 (before the campaign)	932 (the height of the famine)	Decrease in %
Cattle	6.5 million	.2 million	-8%
Small cattle	8 million	2.3 million	-87%
Horses	3 million	0.4 million	-86%
Camels	.5 million	0.2 million	-87%

This sharp decline in livestock numbers had catastrophic consequences: deprived of their means of subsistence, nomads died en masse from hunger or were forced to leave their traditional territories. According to party reports, during 93–933, more than . million people (out of the republic's total population of 6.2 million) either died or migrated outside of Kazakhstan. Of these, almost 66,000 were Kazakhs, which in the long term transformed the ethnic structure of the region.

Soviet economic policy of those years remained export-oriented even in the conditions of growing famine. In 93, the USSR exported 4.8 million tons of grain, part of which was produced in Kazakh state and collective farms. This happened against the backdrop of up to 40% of the population dying in the villages, and in some areas (for example, Karaganda, Kyzyl-Orda) the mortality rate reached 60–70%. Archival documents show that despite signals of disaster from the regions, the center did not reduce plans for the confiscation of livestock and grain, which confirms the deliberate and politically motivated nature of the food tax collection.

It is significant that even party reports recorded manifestations of "anti-Soviet sentiments" among the nomads, which arose not on ideological but on existential grounds: the population associated hunger and the death of families with the actions of the state. This shows that in the minds of the victims themselves, collectivization was not perceived as inevitable progress, but as externally imposed violence.

Thus, collectivization in Kazakhstan performed a dual function: on the one hand, it served as an instrument of internal control over the "national outskirts," and on the other, it provided the USSR with resources for export, which was critically important in the context of industrialization. The famine was not simply a consequence of mistakes, but part of a large-scale strategy of state violence aimed at redistributing resources in favor of the centers of power.

Demographic Consequences: Mortality, Migration, Ethnodemographic Restructuring

The famine in Kazakhstan in 930-933 had not only catastrophic short-term consequences, but also became a turning point in the demographic history of the republic. According to estimates, the total human losses in the period 93-933 amounted to between .3 and .5 million people, which was almost a quarter of the entire population of the Kazakh ASSR at that time. Of these, more than . million people were ethnic Kazakhs, which led to a sharp reduction in their share in the total population of the republic from 60.3% (926) to 38% (939).

Mass mortality was combined with large-scale migration. According to the Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, about 65–650 thousand Kazakhs were forced to leave the territory of the republic. The main migration directions included neighboring Soviet republics — Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Russia — as well as China, Mongolia and Afghanistan. Lost connections with native nomadic regions, depopulation of villages, transition of some migrants to a sedentary lifestyle - all this became a fundamental transformation of the social landscape of Kazakhstan.

For clarity, we present the key data in a table:

Table 2. Dynamics of the number and ethnic structure of the population of Kazakhstan (926–939)

Census year	Total number	Kazakhs (abs.)	Kazakhs (%)	Russians (%)	Other
926	6.2 million	~3.75 million	60.3%	20.6%	9.%
939	6. million	~2.34 million	38.0%	40.2%	2.8%

This demographic inversion - a sharp reduction in the titular nation and an increase in the share of the Russian-speaking population - was the result of both biological factors (mortality) and political factors (migration, resettlement of other groups to Kazakhstan). In the context of the policy of "internationalization" and economic development of the republics, Kazakhstan was turning into an experimental site for the Soviet colonization model, which over time affected the cultural, linguistic and political balance of the region.

It is important to emphasize that the consequences of the famine were not evenly distributed. According to the North Kazakhstan archive, the worst hit were the nomadic regions - Uralsk, Cherlak, Kokchetav - where mortality reached up to 70%, while in some Russian-speaking sedentary regions it did not exceed 5-20%. This exacerbated ethnic imbalances and increased social fragmentation against the backdrop of famine and repression.

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

Comparison with other Soviet Famines: Kazakhstan, Ukraine, The Volga Region as a Single Imperial Policy

The famine in Kazakhstan in 930–933 cannot be viewed in isolation: it was not a local tragic episode, but an integral part of the large-scale intra-imperial strategy of the Soviet government for accelerated modernization and "reformatting" of the country's agrarian space. At the same time, similar processes—forced collectivization, food tax collection, dispossession, ethnically insensitive mobilization campaigns—took place in Ukraine and the Volga region, leading to millions of deaths and serious demographic deformation.

In its mechanism, the Kazakh famine largely repeated the "Ukrainian scenario": forced confiscation of grain and livestock, exceeding food delivery standards, blocking migration and refusing to help the starving. However, Kazakhstan had its own specifics - the destruction of the nomadic economy, which became both the instrument and the result of these repressive measures. If in Ukraine the blow fell on settled peasant farms, then in Kazakhstan collectivization fell on a completely different socio-cultural environment - nomads, whose way of life was not just ignored, but deliberately broken.

At the structural level, all these campaigns reflected the same logic of the Soviet modernization empire: by means of the violent transformation of the countryside and the mobilization of agricultural resources, the state sought not only to industrialize the economy, but also to subordinate peripheral, "national" territories to the center. As historian Timothy Snyder emphasizes, the famine of 932–33, regardless of the region, was part of a system of "selective violence against certain groups of the population that did not fit into the model of total loyalty."

The key element of this system was the confiscation of not only food, but also the right to travel: as in Ukraine, Kazakhstan widely used the practice of blocking the migration of starving people to other regions, which worsened the situation. Documents from the Archives of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan record NKVD orders to intercept and turn back refugees on the approaches to the border with Uzbekistan and Siberia. Such actions were clearly repressive and systemic in nature.

Thus, the Kazakh famine, despite its regional specificity, fits structurally and conceptually into a single series of "intra-imperial food repressions" of the 930s. These campaigns cannot be reduced to local failures or unforeseen consequences of economic policy; on the contrary, they were part of a deep strategy for building a centralized totalitarian empire, in which the agrarian resource – especially the resource of the outlying and ethnically distinct regions – was seen as a mechanism for strengthening the power of the center.

Ireland (845–852): The Great Famine and its Long-Term Impact

The Great Irish Famine of the mid-9th century, known as An Gorta Mór, was not only the largest humanitarian disaster in the history of the island, but also one of the most significant demographic changes in the history of Europe. Between 845 and 852, according to various estimates, between and .5 million people died from starvation and related epidemics. Another 2 million or so emigrated, primarily to the United States, Canada and Australia.

The cause of the disaster was an epidemic of late blight, a fungus that destroyed the main food product of the Irish poor: potatoes. However, such large-scale consequences were not the result of a purely biological crisis. The colonial policy of the British administration played a critical role: at the height of the famine, Ireland continued to export food, primarily meat and grain, to England, under the protection of the army and with the participation of landlords. Despite numerous requests to lift export quotas, London authorities have long adhered to the principles of non-intervention in the market, which has effectively condemned the population to starvation.

The demographic impact of the famine was long-lasting and transformational. By 85, Ireland's population had fallen from 8.2 million to 6.5 million. But it was not only the absolute decline in population that was particularly indicative, but also the change in its structure: aging increased, the birth rate dropped sharply, and an "inner desert"

began in rural areas where villages became deserted. Many regions, especially in the west of the country, never regained their former numbers.

Table 3. Change in the population of Ireland (84–90)

Census year	Population, million	Change from 84 (%)
84	8.2	—
85	6.5	-20.7%
87	5.4	-34.%
90	4.4	-46.3%

Emigration was not only a forced response to famine, but also an institutionalized form of demographic survival. In 847, known as "Black '47," more than 250,000 people left Ireland, mostly for the United States and Canada. Mass emigration continued until the end of the century: from 85 to 900, about 3 million more people left Ireland. Many of them settled in the industrial centers of America, forming stable Irish diasporas that not only preserved their ethnic identity, but also actively influenced politics, culture and the trade union movement in the new countries.

It is characteristic that the emigration flows affected primarily the young and working population, especially women. According to FIPAS (Famine Irish Passenger Archive System), almost 400 thousand single women aged 5-30 emigrated from Ireland during the famine years, which affected the gender and age imbalance in the remaining rural communities. This led to accelerated population ageing and depopulation of the Irish countryside for decades to come.

Beyond the demographic impact, the Great Famine had a powerful cultural and psychological impact. The memory of the disaster became entrenched in Irish culture, folklore, and political discourse. The famine became a marker of the injustice of colonial rule and a key argument in the independence movement. In the literature, songs, and visual arts of the Irish diaspora (especially in Boston and New York), the theme of the famine became an element of national mythology, reinforcing a sense of shared destiny and historical trauma.

Thus, the Great Irish Famine not only radically changed the size and structure of the country's population, but also led to the formation of a global diaspora, the transformation of the social fabric, and the redefinition of national identity. Unlike the Kazakh or Indian famines, the Irish case is particularly indicative in terms of the formation of sustainable transnational migration systems that continue to operate to this day.

Population Aging, Agrarian Decline, and the Long Recovery: The Great Famine as an Early Global Migration Catastrophe

After the end of the famine in 852, Ireland entered a new phase in its demographic history, characterized not by recovery but by protracted stagnation and transformation of the rural structure. The loss of almost half the population over several decades was not a temporary aberration but the beginning of a new, sustainable trend: the aging of society, de-agrarianization and a permanent population drain.

Since the bulk of the emigrants were young, able-bodied people, the remaining population was largely made up of the elderly, women, and children. According to the 87 census, the proportion of the population over 50 in the western counties of the country had almost doubled compared to the figures of 84. This led to a reduction in the number of agricultural workers, land abandonment, and a decline in agricultural productivity. The shortage of young men hampered any attempt to rebuild the peasant sector.

In addition, a wave of land consolidation began in the 860s, with small farmers going bankrupt or abandoning their farms, and landlords consolidating their plots into large pastures. This led to a decline in the rural population even as famine ended and food prices stabilized. Thus, the Irish village lost not only people, but also institutional mechanisms of self-reproduction: communal forms of cooperation, family ties and neighborly mutual assistance.

It is significant that by 90 the population of Ireland had not even returned to the level of 85 – the country was still losing population through outflows, primarily to the USA. This makes the Irish case especially significant in terms of global demographic dynamics. Researchers call it the first global migration catastrophe in history, caused not only by economic but also by political factors – the ineffective and repressive policy of colonial governance. Mass emigration from Ireland to America became the prototype of the flows of refugees and labor migrants that would later cover Eastern Europe, India, China and the Middle East. The formation of the diaspora not only changed the composition of the population of the host countries, but also became a new demographic resource for the Irish themselves – who retained their identity, economic solidarity and political influence abroad.

India (Bengal Famine of 943): Colonial Food Policy, War Supplies and System Collapse

The Bengal famine of 943 was one of the most tragic pages in the history of British India and, along with the famines in Kazakhstan and Ireland, is an example of how politically motivated management of food flows can lead

to the death of millions. According to various estimates, between 2. and 3 million people died from hunger and epidemics in Bengal.

Unlike famines caused by crop failure or natural disasters, the Bengal disaster was, as Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze have shown, "induced by market dynamics and exacerbated by political inaction." Although the 942 harvest was 5-0% below average, it did not foreshadow a large-scale catastrophe. The reasons lie in the actions of the colonial administration, which decided to redistribute grain in favor of the British army and allies in Burma and on the Pacific front.

During the Second World War, India was seen by the mother country as a logistical base and a source of resources. The so-called "denial" policy (strategic destruction of boats, cattle, rice) was carried out to prevent Japanese advancement in Bengal, but in practice left millions of people without access to food and means of subsistence. At the same time, food reserves were concentrated in Calcutta and Madras, where garrisons and military depots operated, while rural areas were left without basic support.

Table 4. Food supply and mortality ratio in Bengal, 943–44.

Indicator	**942**	**943**	**944**
Rice harvest (million tons)	7.7	6.9	7.3
Average price of rice (Rs/00 kg)	5	5	46
Mortality (million people)	—	2.–3.0	0.6–0.8

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 from London were ignored: Winston Churchill frankly stated in cables that "the Indians are breeding like rabbits" and did not deserve to divert grain ships destined for British troops. Moreover, despite the availability of reserves, rice supplies to Bengal from other Indian provinces were blocked to maintain "stability" in the regions where the British had bases.

Along with rising prices, panic and speculation, the food market collapsed. Small farmers were forced to sell their land and livestock for a sack of rice. Epidemics (cholera, dysentery) broke out in the cities, increasing the death rate. Many children left to die were captured in photographs by Sunil Janah and in reports by Statesman editor Ian Stevens, after which the problem gained international publicity.

The Bengal famine cannot therefore be seen as a natural disaster. It was a structural collapse of the food system, exacerbated by militarization and a racial-imperial logic of governance in which colonial populations became secondary to imperial interests. As in the case of Kazakhstan and Ireland, the deaths of millions were not an accident, but the result of policy decisions at the metropolitan level.

Internal Migration, Declining Birth Rates and the Strengthening of the Anti-Colonialist Movement

Along with the collapse of food supplies and mass deaths, the Bengal famine of 943 triggered a wave of internal migration. Tens of thousands of peasants and landless laborers, who lost access to food and work, began moving toward major cities such as Calcutta, Howrah, and Dhaka in search of any kind of support. These flows were spontaneous, unorganized, and often perceived by local authorities as a threat to sanitary and social stability. People died on train platforms, in alleys, near markets and churches - often without receiving basic care.

The migration was exacerbated by the fact that the refugees had no means of returning: the rural economy was destroyed, crops were destroyed, property was sold or lost. The famine turned tens of thousands of people into a "moving population of despair", destabilizing not only the countryside but also urban spaces. This led to increased homelessness, crime, social unrest and epidemics in the metropolitan areas of Bengal.

The second major demographic consequence was a sharp decline in birth rates. Jan Drez and Amartya Sen estimate that female fertility in the affected areas fell by 30–50% during 943–45. This is explained not only by high mortality, but also by biological exhaustion, stress, mass starvation and the destruction of family structures. Like Kazakhstan in the 930s, the Bengal famine caused a shift in the demographic cycle - the formation of a "lost generation" that was felt in Indian statistics even in the post-war decades.

The third major consequence of the famine was the political mobilization of the population. Although the anti-colonialist movement in India had mass support before 943, it was the Bengal famine that became a powerful catalyst for its radicalization. The colonial failure to save millions, London's cold responses, and refusal to provide aid, accompanied by mass deaths, became a powerful argument for immediate liberation from British rule.

Photographs, newspapers, street theatre, poetry, speeches by young activists of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League - all these channels began to convey the image of "famine as evidence of imperial cruelty"Bengal was transformed from an imperial capital into a symbol of the tragedy of colonial rule, and it was here that the most violent outbreaks of protest against British India began in 945–47.

Thus, the famine of 943 was not only a demographic shock but also a major turning point in Indian history. It demonstrated the limits of imperial control, destroyed the illusion of the British Empire's "civilizing mission," and created the preconditions for the accelerated withdrawal of the colonialists in 947.

COMPARATIVE AND ANALYTICAL SECTION

Despite obvious differences in geographic, cultural, and temporal context, the tragedies of Kazakhstan, Ireland, and India during the period of mass famines share a common mechanism: transnational redistribution of resources, centered on migration, food exports, and global channels of economic pressure. These famines cannot be viewed as purely domestic events. Each was embedded in a global system in which agricultural regions served as peripheries, supplying resources—food, labor, currency—to centralized states or empires.

The first and most obvious transnational mechanism is food exports in the context of domestic catastrophes. In Ireland, despite mass famine, grain, meat and other goods continued to be exported to England; in India, rice, wheat and jute were exported, primarily for the needs of the British army and allies during World War II. Even in the USSR, although exports were not so large-scale during the height of the Kazakh famine, the center's policy was oriented toward selling grain and meat abroad in order to purchase machine tools, equipment and currency, as part of the five-year plan.

Each of these tragedies thus demonstrates that food exports could occur in conditions of domestic famine if they were dictated by the logic of geopolitical or economic priorities. These decisions were made without regard for demographic or humanitarian consequences, making them part of global food chains of power in which the lives of the population of the colony or national republic were of secondary importance.

The second key transnational mechanism is migration as a demographic response and a form of redistribution of labor resources. The Irish case was one of the first examples of mass diaspora caused by famine in history, with millions of refugees moving to the United States, Canada, and Australia, creating stable transatlantic communities. In India, internal migration destroyed the social fabric of villages and caused long-term changes in urbanization and the structure of poverty. Kazakhstan, although not generating a global diaspora, became a site of mass internal displacement (to other Soviet republics) and an object of internal colonization policies.

These migrations were not neutral: they changed the ethnic composition of regions, destroyed traditional forms of economy (nomadism, village communities), formed new political identities, especially in the case of the Irish and Indians. Famine turned out to be a mechanism for transforming not only the population size, but also its spatial distribution and political self-awareness.

Finally, it is worth noting the global chains of influence that linked local tragedies to decisions in London, Moscow or New Delhi. In Ireland, decisions not to intervene in the market were made in Westminster, despite the rising death toll. In India, the refusal to reroute ships with grain, despite the protests of the colonial administration and the reports of governors. In the USSR, the centralized implementation of plans for the seizure of resources, despite signals of disaster from the regions.

All three cases demonstrate that power over food becomes power over the population. The management of supplies, transport, distribution is not just logistics, but an instrument of politics. Hunger, being on the one hand a consequence of economic failures, on the other a conscious political decision, becomes part of the infrastructure of control in the globalized world of the 20th century.

In all three cases examined – Kazakhstan, Ireland and Bengal – the key actor that determined the scale and nature of the tragedy was the state or metropolis, which had exclusive power over the distribution of resources. The famine did not occur in a vacuum. It became part of a political scenario in which control over food was used as an instrument of governance, pressure and transformation of society.

In the 930s, the Soviet Union implemented an aggressive policy of modernization in Kazakhstan through collectivization, using the administrative apparatus and punitive bodies to achieve economic goals. The violent confiscation of livestock, the destruction of the village, deportations and blocking of migration were not the result of a spontaneous crisis, but a conscious choice of the center, implemented through the bureaucratic vertical - from the State Planning Committee to the NKVD The policy of violent seizure of resources in conditions of food shortages, especially in national republics, was part of the imperial logic of subjugating the outskirts and eliminating local autonomy, including ethnocultural autonomy.

The British Empire, in turn, demonstrated the paradox of modern liberalism, combining the market, bureaucracy and systemic violence. During the Great Famine in Ireland, the British laissez-faire policy predetermined the refusal to intervene in the market: in the face of rising mortality, the state continued to support free food exports and did not take steps to control prices or mobilize food. Moreover, rent collection continued from starving tenants, and attempts at self-help by the population were perceived as a threat to order.

In Bengal, the British government resorted to active mobilization of resources – but only in the interests of imperial defense. The strategy of "denial" (denial of access to boats, cattle and rice) and the refusal to move grain between regions of India demonstrate the priority of military objectives over the lives of civilians. Decisions on food redistribution were made not locally, but in London and New Delhi, and in some cases supplies to the worst-hit areas were directly blocked, despite the availability of reserves.

Thus, in both the USSR and the British Empire, famine was not simply the result of managerial inefficiency, but the consequence of systemic political decisions. It was a form of violence not through bullets or repression,

but through economic coercion and bureaucratic control over food. This understanding makes famine not a humanitarian anomaly, but an instrument of power built into the architecture of the state.

It is especially significant that in both cases the victims were marginalized groups: nomadic Muslims in Kazakhstan, Catholic peasants in Ireland, and the poorest Bengali villages in India. The common feature is the ethnically, religiously, or class-based nature of the famine, which allows us to speak of it as a mechanism not only for control, but also for the suppression of certain communities.

Regardless of geographic location and colonial status, famines in Kazakhstan, Ireland, and Bengal produced a series of recurring demographic patterns common to all cases: sharp increases in mortality, falls in fertility, massive population movements, and long-term ethno-demographic changes.

Mortality was the first and most obvious consequence of all three tragedies. In Kazakhstan, no less than .3 million people died in 93–933, including more than a million ethnic Kazakhs — about 20–25% of the republic's population at the time. In Ireland, mortality between 845 and 852 was between and .5 million people. In India, during the Bengal famine of 943, the number of victims, according to various estimates, reached 2.–3 million people. These figures go beyond normal demographic fluctuations and represent large-scale human losses comparable to military campaigns or epidemics.

However, the famine did not only affect mortality. In all three cases, there was a sharp decline in the birth rate, which, together with high mortality, caused a sharp decline in natural growth. The biological and social consequences of exhaustion, the destruction of family and economic structures, the collapse of support institutions (clan, community, parish) made reproduction of the population impossible. In Bengal, according to A. Sen and Drez, the fertility of women in the affected areas fell by almost half. In Kazakhstan and Ireland, demographic failures lasting for decades were recorded after the famine.

The third universal factor was the mass movement of population. Emigration from Ireland took on a global character: from 846 to the beginning of the 20th century, about 3.5 million people left the country. This wave formed stable diasporas in the USA, Canada, Australia, strengthening the global Irish identity. In India, migrations were mostly internal: millions fled from rural Bengal to Calcutta, Madras, and port areas, causing urbanization pressure, homelessness, and epidemics. In Kazakhstan, more than 600,000 Kazakhs migrated to neighboring republics, China and Mongolia, and some died en route. These movements radically changed the distribution of the population, disrupted kinship and ethnic balances, and served as the basis for new demographic trajectories.

Finally, all three famines caused profound ethno-demographic shifts. In Kazakhstan, where Kazakhs made up 60.3% of the population in 926, their share had fallen to 38% by 939, largely due to mortality and migration. In Ireland, the demographic void in the western counties was accompanied by the erosion of the traditional Irish Catholic way of life, the transition to urban life in exile, and the growth of English-speaking influence. In India, by contrast, the tragedy strengthened the regional consciousness and ethno-linguistic identity of the Bengalis – which would later be used in political mobilization.

In all cases, famine became not only an instrument of violence, but also a factor in long-term demographic restructuring. The changes caused by the catastrophe were not recoverable for decades and set new parameters for ethnic composition, population density, reproductive patterns, and migration flows.

Diasporas and Cultural Memory: Irish, Indians and Kazakhs – Exchanging Practices and Identities

One of the most significant long-term consequences of the famines in Ireland, India, and Kazakhstan was the formation of transnational diasporas, in which not only the bearers of destroyed communities survived, but also new forms of identity were created based on the memory of the catastrophe. These diasporas became spaces of exchange – not only cultural and economic, but also traumatic, historical, symbolic.

Irish Diaspora, became a classic example of the transformation of famine into a political and cultural myth. Millions of Irish people who emigrated to the United States, Canada, and Australia in the mid-9th century not only preserved their ethnocultural identity, but also turned the memory of the Great Famine into the basis of their historical self-awareness. Memorials, Catholic parishes, family chronicles, oral history — all of this formed the image of Ireland as a victim of British injustice. This memory fueled not only cultural solidarity but also political activism, including support for Irish independence among Irish Americans and Canadians.

Bengali Diaspora, was formed later, in the 20th century, and, unlike the Irish, had a predominantly intracontinental and British-African vector. However, here too, the cultural memory of the 943 famine left a deep mark on literature, art, and political thinking. In post-war Bengal, the famine became a symbol of the failure of the British Empire and became part of the cultural heritage as an episode of collective trauma: in prose, cinema (for example, Satyajit Ray's films), journalism, and folk poetry. Even in the diaspora, particularly in Britain, the descendants of migrants understand the famine as a key to understanding their own origins and historical vulnerability.

Kazakh Diaspora, unlike the two described above, was primarily forced and remained invisible for a long time - both inside the USSR and beyond its borders. Kazakhs who fled from famine to China, Mongolia,

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, did not form stable autonomous communities with a clearly articulated historical memory, as was the case with the Irish. The Soviet policy of hushing up and tabooing the tragedy of 93-933 prevented the formation of a collective identity based on the memory of the famine. It was only after Kazakhstan gained independence in 99 that the restoration of historical memory, the publication of archives, the creation of memorials and the inclusion of the topic in school curricula began.

However, similarities can be observed here too: returning to the memory of the famine becomes an act of restoring national identity, a form of resistance to previous political silence, and part of a global trend toward recognizing historical trauma. In recent years, the Kazakh scientific and public environment has intensified cooperation with foreign historians, which contributes to the inclusion of the tragedy of the Kazakh famine in international humanitarian and historical discussions.

Thus, in all three cases – despite differences in the degree of politicization and institutionalization of memory – we can say that diasporas and cultural memory form a new layer of transnational identity, based not only on language, religion or origin, but also on the collective experience of the disaster. Famine becomes not only a demographic funnel, but also a point of cultural crystallization, turning suffering into a symbol, and loss into a source of solidarity.

Regional Famines as a Window into Global Demographic and Political Transformations

Historically, famine has been perceived as a local disaster—the result of natural crop failures, epidemics, or supply disruptions. However, an analysis of three cases—Kazakhstan (93–33), Ireland (845–52), and Bengal (943)—shows that famine in 20th-century agrarian societies was not so much a spontaneous phenomenon as a structural element of the global order, embedded in the logics of empires, markets, and modernization projects.

Each of the cases examined demonstrates how regional food catastrophes became elements of transnational politics. In the USSR, British India and colonial Ireland, famine was not the result of an absolute lack of food, but a consequence of the management of its flows in the interests of the center: Moscow, London, imperial garrisons. These famines functioned as political-economic mechanisms for the redistribution of resources, in which the agrarian population acted as an object of mobilization, subordination and structural vulnerability.

Demographically, each case demonstrates a combination of high mortality, falling birth rates, the destruction of the reproductive model and large-scale migration. However, it is the comparison of these processes that reveals their global pattern: famine acts as a "demographic interception" - a situation in which a state or empire deliberately allows the bleeding of the agricultural sector for the sake of other strategic goals: industrialization, military supplies, economic stability of the center.

Moreover, famine initiates cultural and political transformations. The Irish diaspora becomes a political actor, the Bengal tragedy accelerates the end of colonial rule, the Kazakh famine triggers processes of national mobilization already in the post-Soviet period. Thus, famine is not only a humanitarian catastrophe, but also a historical turn, reformatting the relations between the state and society, between the center and the periphery, between memory and politics.

It is especially important to understand famine as a universal phenomenon that goes beyond national or regional history. It becomes part of a global history of coercion and control – through food, migration, and population planning. Studying such tragedies at a comparative level allows us not only to establish factual parallels, but also to reconstruct common principles of power action in conditions of structural deficit, including repressive silence, statistical management, blocking of movement, and justification of violence through "higher goals."

This work also contributes to the development of historical memory and a transnational humanitarian agenda. While some famines (such as the Ukrainian one) are recognized in international politics, others – including the Kazakh and Bengal famines – remain on the periphery of attention despite their comparable scale. In this context, comparative research not only helps fill historiographical gaps, but also contributes to global history a more complete understanding of the social costs of modernization, especially for peripheral and colonized societies.

The Politics of Famine as an Imperial Demographic Strategy

In all three cases – 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 using resources (or denying them) in conditions of shortage, states and empires implemented an implicit but powerful demographic policy aimed at the structural transformation of their peripheries.

The Soviet model in Kazakhstan demonstrates the deliberate destruction of the nomadic way of life through forced collectivization, food tax collection, deportations and administrative displacement of traditional social ties. These measures led not only to the physical destruction of hundreds of thousands of people, but also to the liquidation of an autonomous ethnocultural system, which corresponds to the definition of genocide as "the destruction of the conditions for the reproduction of a group.".

British policy in Ireland and India, for all their differences, also followed the logic of demographic reformatting through economic passivity or aggressive mobilization of resources. In Ireland, it was a market without intervention; in Bengal, total control over transport, supplies, and reserves. In both cases, imperial policy demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice the lives of the population for strategic or ideological purposes: the defense of the imperial order, the stabilization of the economy, military mobilization.

Thus, the theory of the "politics of hunger" is confirmed empirically in these cases. Hunger becomes not a mistake, but a method: a way to discipline the agricultural sector, destroy undesirable social structures, control migration and redistribution of labor. It turns into a form of imperial demographic design, integrated into long-term management strategies.

Transnational Memory and Migration as a Basis of Identity

An important consequence of these catastrophes is their memorial and identification legacy. Diasporas formed as a result of famine become not only a demographic but also a cultural and political factor. The Irish diaspora in the United States and Canada legitimized its presence through the collective memory of the famine, which turned into a political resource in the struggle for independence and the rights of immigrants.

The Bengali intellectual tradition, especially after 947, integrated the famine into the framework of national trauma, which was reflected in poetry, cinema, and folklore. The memory of the famine became one of the moral justifications for the rejection of colonial subordination and the rebuilding of the national narrative.

Kazakh post-Soviet identity is also increasingly based on the rehabilitation of the memory of the famine, previously hushed up. This transformation – from collective amnesia to conscious memorialization – speaks of the emergence of a new cultural subjectivity in which historical trauma becomes part of the national "I"

Thus, memory and migration are not only consequences, but also factors in the formation of modern identity. Transnational communities formed as a result of catastrophes become carriers of a unique historical code, transmitted through generations and involved in global political and humanitarian discussions. Famine turns from a biological and economic phenomenon into a memorial marker capable of uniting or mobilizing.

CONCLUSION

The cases of mass famine examined in this article are not simply tragedies of the past, but archetypes of managed demographic transformations. They show how famine became an instrument of imperial biopolitical control, and food policy a mechanism for the redistribution of power and space.

Soviet Kazakhstan, colonial Ireland, and Bengal were all drawn into projects where modernization and centralized control replaced viable local practices. Behind the famines were programs to change ethnic balance, destroy traditional ways of life, suppress resistance, and eliminate "surplus" populations. And although the historical contexts are different, the demographic patterns—sharp declines, waves of emigration, ethnic shifts—are repeated with alarming accuracy.

Contemporary global challenges – from climate catastrophes to forced migration – require a rethinking of previous experiences. It is the memory of famine, recorded in diasporas, sources and cultural practices, that becomes the most important resource for political subjectivity and historical self-awareness.

This study offers not only a historical explanation but also a theoretical framework that sees famine as a controlled strategy rather than an accident. This perspective opens up new horizons in the study of empires, populations, and power—and offers new answers to an old question: how does the political become biological?

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