

## Overview of famine in Europe

The European continent and the British Isles were historically the most affected area to be stricken with famine in history. Agriculture was practised only in the summer months and the cyclical loss of harvest goods, harvest shortages, and the all over lack of food caused devastating famine in the winter months. Hunger and cold weather shortened the life expectancy, caused mass deaths and oppressed the growth of the population. A minimum of 350 events of famine affected Europe between the year 10 and 1846. Almost 60% of these events happened in the British Isles; this means that about once every 5 years a famine ravished. In most writings of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC in Greece were notions such as Sitodeia grain shortage and Limos famine or death from hunger used. The area of ancient Greece that was mainly dependent on only one harvest had the greatest risk to contract famine. To escape these risks of hunger, a national and international commercial trade was established in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC, collecting large amounts of grain, up to the Hellenistic and Roman period. Not only Greece, but all of the Mediterranean area were affected by famine throughout the Antiquity. The area around the Mediterranean sea was dry and with infrequent precipitation. The farmers produced very limited amounts of grain varieties, used primitive agriculture practises, and there was no surplus of foodstuffs during famine outbreaks. Not only was the lack of precipitation and the resulting crop loss responsible for the famine, but also the invasion from outside that took away the harvested goods from the farmers.

The Roman empire alone during the glory times established around the Mediterranean area taxes and tributes in the form of cash and goods. These were additional causes of famine in the Mediterranean area. To take care of the people of Rome, grains were imported from the regions of the entire Mediterranean area. Besides these undertakings, famine existed in Rome from time to time. During the governance of Emperor Augustus erupted a famine (22BC). To escape the hunger, gladiators and slaves destined to be sold, were taken 100 miles away from the city. Augustus and his officers had to let go of the servants, the courts had to be closed. Senators were granted to leave the city to establish new residence wherever they wanted. Foodstuffs were so short that Emperor Augustus did not give permission to have a banquet meal celebration on his birthday.

Famine in Europe did not only surface during periods of extreme food shortage caused by a meager harvest, but there existed a sort of permanent hunger among poor. Piero Camporesi examined the hunger and misery in pre-industrial Europe. He wrote about this development from the early medieval times until the 18<sup>th</sup> Century in Europe. People with fatal illness, wrinkled; thin and leathery skin and faces like mummies, this were the pictures in many European cities. During the Thirty Years' War and the Fronde, people ate the bark of trees and dirt to prolong the wretchedness and the suffering. Animal cadavers, whose lives were lost to the plague, were cooked for lunch. People were on the lookout for dead animals and were also not shy to use human flesh in desperation. Germany lost one-half of it's inhabitants during the famine in the year 1125. Alone in the year 1715 six million people died of starvation in France. Between the years 1620 and 1720, within 100 years, the population in France declined from 23 million to 12 million, whereas the main reason was chronic famine. Smaller and more localised hunger were unaccounted for, and sometimes also larger outbreaks were not noticed because the country experienced a crisis such as war or an epidemic.

The commonness of famine outbreak is shown in the example of Florence. In the neighbourhood of Florence existed between the years 1375 and 1791, a time of 416 years, an estimated 111 cases of crop failure; to be specific, less than every four years existed a period of famine. The greatest dearth in Ireland happened in the years 1845-1848 and claimed one million people; another two million had to emigrate. The main reason was disease that affected the potato harvest called *Phytophthora* that destroyed the crops during these years. In the year 1879 emerged the same

disease and this time destroyed the entire harvest. According to the recount was the situation as bad as in the years 1845-1848. But the public interest was limited and there was no special effort to report this.

Over 700.000 people died of hunger in Germany in 1917 from the same potato disease *Phytophthora* because the potato harvest was affected by the disease. Survivors ate rutabaga as part of the diet. Because of this reason is this famine known as the winter of rutabaga (in German *Kohlrübenwinter*). After the civil war in the former USSR in 1920-1947 were the people often plagued by famine. According to Russian accounts five million people died alone in the years 1920-1922 from famine and epidemics. Even more devastating dearth occurred during the Second World War in Europe. The most serious was in Poland 1941/42, Greece 1942/43, and the Netherlands 1944/45. After the Second World War occurred in the year 1947 in the former Soviet Republic again a famine. The dimension is barely known. Indeed lessened the periodic outbreaks of famine in Europe from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century bit by bit and at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, famine caused by crop failure, disappeared altogether.