

## A 'Free Trade' Blight Caused the Irish Famine

The British “free trade” policies that led to the Irish Potato Genocide of the 1840s serve as a model for the practices of the World Trade Organization today. As with Third World countries under the WTO now, throughout the famine, food was *exported* from Ireland. Enough wheat to feed the entire Irish population was shipped out of the country *each year*. More corn was *exported in a month than was imported in a year*. The “market” was not permitted to be “disrupted,” despite desperate need.

Starting when the blight hit in 1845, more people died of typhus, cholera, dysentery, and scurvy, than succumbed to starvation.

What did the benevolent Brits do? They put the Coercion Act through Parliament, authorizing the imposition of martial law. They brought in 50,000 troops. Soldiers and the local constabulary protected foods to be exported, while locals were reduced to beggary. Funds were not allowed to be used for planting crops, reclaiming bogs, or building railroads, supposedly because that sort of subsidy would be giving the Irish peasants an unfair advantage in a “free-trade” world.

The magnanimous Malthusian Brits set up food depots

in 1846, but forbade them to be opened while food could still be procured from the private sector, unattainably high prices be damned. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1847 prohibited a peasant holding a quarter-acre or more from being eligible for relief.

For more than a century, British “free trade” policies had driven the Irish further and further into immiseration. A 1741 famine in British Ireland killed some quarter million people. In the first decades of the 19th Century, Ireland was hit with 14 years of famine before the famous devastation that began in 1845.

By the early 1840s, the Irish diet had been so destroyed that more than half the men consumed between 7 and 15 pounds of potato *a day*—maybe supplemented by some milk. More likely, water.

Just as Britain tried to do to pre-Revolutionary America, British policy kept the Industrial Revolution out of Ireland.

The 1840s’ ravaging of the Irish potato was caused by *Phytophthora infestans*, thought to have been brought from Mexico. The blight’s arrival found a susceptible population, weakened by policies known to have come from the City of London. By the time the bleeding began to subside, British “free trade,” its Irish collaborators, and its colonial soldiers had caused the death or displacement of roughly a quarter of the Irish population.

It was a “free trade” blight that caused the Irish Potato Genocide.—*Franklin Bell*