

## The 'Black Death': A Catastrophe in Medieval Europe

Millions of people in Europe perished in the plague that struck in the mid-1300s. Later called the "Black Death," this plague upended feudal society and hastened major changes in Western Civilization.

Since the last Ice Age, a certain flea has lived off the blood of rodents, especially the black rat, in Central Asia. The black rat flea is also the primary host of the deadly plague bacteria, *Yersinia pestis* (named after Alexandre Yersin who discovered it in 1894).

A flea infected with *Y. pestis* passes it on to a black rat by biting it. When the rat dies, the flea jumps to another rat. Normally, enough rats have genetic resistance to *Y. pestis* to prevent a mass die-off.

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Sometimes, however, a change in climate or other conditions may weaken the rat population, and infected fleas kill off more rats than usual. If the fleas cannot find rats, they find different warm-blooded animals to bite, such as other rodents, cows, horses, cats, and humans.

When an infected flea bites a person, it literally vomits the *Y. pestis* bacteria into the wound. The bacteria migrate to the lymph glands and block the body's attempt to destroy them by attacking the immune system.

There are several forms of the plague. The most common is the bubonic plague. Its main symptom is the swelling of lymph glands, called "buboes," in the groin, armpits, or neck. Victims experience a high fever, and they often bleed under the skin, causing visible dark patches. This discoloring of the skin gave the name "Black Death" to the plague that struck Europe in the mid-1300s.



*Images of devastation and death haunted European art for centuries following the Black Death. This is Triumph of Death by the Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel (c. 1525–1569). (Wikimedia Commons)*

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## Population Perils

This edition of *Bill of Rights in Action* examines issues related to population perils. Our first article looks at the bubonic plague that devastated Europe in the 14th century, killing one-third to one-half of the population. The second article explores the Irish Potato Famine, which killed more than 1 million and caused another million to immigrate to the U.S. The last article examines the controversy over whether overpopulation presents a major world problem.

**World History: The "Black Death": A Catastrophe in Medieval Europe**

**U.S. History: The Potato Famine and Irish Immigration to America**

**Current Issue: The Debate Over World Population: Was Malthus Right?**

Guest writer Lucy Eisenberg, Esq., contributed the article on the Potato Famine. Our longtime contributor Carlton Martz wrote the other articles.

The bubonic plague does not pass directly from person to person. Usually, a rat flea carrying *Y. pestis* must bite a person to cause the infection. Bubonic plague victims during the medieval epidemic had only a 50–50 chance of surviving.

A second form of plague is pneumonic, in which the bacteria attack the lungs. The most common symptom is coughing and spitting up blood. The pneumonic form may develop in the late stages of bubonic plague as bacteria invade the lungs.

Unlike bubonic plague, the pneumonic form is highly contagious. Someone can catch this form of the plague by breathing in bacteria that a sick individual has coughed or sneezed into the air. Few survived this form of the plague during the Black Death.

### **The Path of the Black Death**

Sometime around 1300, the climate began to get hotter and drier in Central Asia. Millions of black rats left their home territories in search of food. Many found food in the camps of Mongol nomadic herders who lived on the vast plains of the Asian interior. The Black Death began here.

Central Asia was the core of the Mongol Empire. By the late 1200s, the Mongols had taken China, overrun Russia, and conquered Muslim lands from Afghanistan to Baghdad. As Mongol armies moved about the empire with their supply wagons of grain and other food, they attracted rats and the fleas infected with the plague.

By the 1330s, merchant caravans were passing right through plague-infested Central Asia. Once the plague reached China's ports, stowaway plague rats and fleas traveled by ship to India and Arabia.

Genoa was one of Italy's greatest trading powers in the eastern Mediterranean. It had established a center for the Asian caravan trade at the Black Sea port of Caffa. In 1346, a dispute between the local Mongol khan and the Genoese led to a minor war. During the siege of Caffa, the plague struck the Mongol soldiers. When the Genoese sailed home, their ships carried hundreds of rats and infected fleas in their food supplies below deck.

When the ships reached Constantinople (now Istanbul), a major trading port on the doorstep of Europe, many of those aboard were sick or dead of the plague. Officials at Constantinople prohibited the sick Genoese from entering the city. But this did not stop rats and fleas from leaving the ships and infecting the harbor rats.

From Constantinople, trading vessels, carrying plague rats and fleas, spread the disease to eastern Mediterranean

countries like Egypt and Syria. Within two years, the plague had spread throughout the entire Muslim empire from Arabia across North Africa to Granada in southern Spain. Perhaps one-third of the Muslim people died. The path of the Black Death through Europe was even more catastrophic.

### **The Black Death in Europe**

The plague was not a new disease to Europe. Periodically, it broke out of its home among the rodents of Central Asia to bring death to Europeans. But it had been 800 years since the last major plague epidemic had struck Europe. Thus, the people had little natural immunity to the *Y. pestis* bacteria.

Most people in Europe lived in small villages close to grain fields. Their cramped houses composed of sticks, mud, and straw roofs made it easy for rats to invade and built nests. In crowded European towns, rats feasted on waste from outdoor slaughterhouses and garbage dumped into the streets.

Sicily was the first place in Europe to suffer the plague epidemic. Italian traders brought the disease in rat-infested ships from Constantinople in October 1347. Soon entire families were dying.

Ships then took the plague to Italy's major trading ports of Genoa, Pisa, and Venice. Venice was probably Europe's largest and richest city with a population of about 150,000. It was also the first to adopt public health laws to block the plague. Even so, Venice lost 60 percent of its people to the Black Death.

By 1348, the plague had reached the interior of Italy, including Florence, which lost half its population. The Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio witnessed and wrote about the plague in his book, *The Decameron*. In his introduction, Boccaccio described the sometimes-shocking way people in Florence behaved during the plague:

Tedious were it to recount, how citizen avoided citizen, how among neighbors was scarce found any that showed fellow-feeling for another, how kinsfolk held aloof, and never met . . . nay, what is more, and scarcely to be believed, fathers and mothers were found to abandon their own children, untended, unvisited, to their fate, as if they had been strangers.

From Italy, the plague spread throughout Europe. It headed west to Christian Spain and surged north into France. The plague advanced "town by town." It reached the many ports of England, which lost half its population in 18 months.

In 1348–49, the Black Death swept into Central Europe and Scandinavia, even as far west as Greenland. But the *Y. pestis* bacteria possibly mutated to a weaker strain since the death rate dropped as the plague spread into Eastern Europe and Russia.

In 1352, the plague reached Moscow, only a few hundred miles from Caffa, the first city struck by the epidemic. Thus, the Black Death completed a great circle, wiping out from one-third to one-half of medieval Europe's total population.

### **The Response of Religion and Medicine**

In Christian Europe, the Roman Catholic Church explained the plague as God's punishing the sins of the people. The church called for people to pray, and it organized religious marches, pleading to God to stop the "pestilence."

Few university medical schools existed in Europe. The "physicians" of these schools had mastered the medical writings of the ancient Greeks. But these academic doctors never treated patients. Lesser-trained surgeons and other healers used various practical skills and remedies to treat the sick.

The prevailing theory of keeping healthy was for the body to maintain the proper balance of fluids, called "humors." Breathing any foul air or vapors from dead bodies, polluted water, or even gases released by earthquakes could unbalance the humors.

At the plague's peak in France, the medical faculty of the University of Paris wrote a report on how the disease began. The report declared that the alignment of planets "drew up evil vapors from the earth," which were spread by "wild and southerly winds." When breathed in, so went the report, foul air "penetrates to the heart and corrupts the substance of the spirit that is in it."

The European physicians had lots of advice on how to avoid the plague:

- Flee as the plague approaches.
- Avoid exercise and bathing.
- Burn incense and carry flowers.
- Smell strong odors as from a latrine to overcome the plague vapors.
- Wear religious medals and papers with magic words like "Abracadabra."

European doctors recommended treatments such as drinking a potion of ground chicken bones, cutting open and burning the buboes, and even swallowing the pus of



*This illustration of people infected with the bubonic plague was in a German Bible published in 1411. (Wikimedia Commons)*

the buboes. Another popular treatment was bleeding patients to remove the "bad humor."

As in Christian Europe, Muslims believed that God's will caused the plague. But Muslim religious scholars taught that the plague was a "martyrdom and mercy" from God, assuring the believer's place in paradise. For non-believers, it was a punishment.

Some Muslim doctors cautioned against trying to prevent or treat a disease sent by God. Others adopted many of the same preventive measures and treatments for the plague used by the Europeans. These Muslim doctors also depended on the writings of the ancient Greeks.

### **Pogroms and the Flagellants**

In 1348, a rumor claimed that Jews were responsible for the plague as an attempt to kill Christians and dominate the world. The rumor spread quickly, supported by a widely distributed report of the trial of Jews who supposedly had poisoned wells in Switzerland. Swiss officials claimed the charges were true since "many Jews have been submitted to torture" and confessed.

The rumor set off a wave of pogroms (violence) against Jews. Christians attacked them in their communities, burned their homes, sent them down the Rhine River in wine barrels, and murdered them with clubs and axes. In perhaps the worst case, the people of Strasbourg locked up and burned 900 Jews alive.

In October 1349, Pope Clement VI issued a religious order to stop the violence against the Jews. He said that Jews did not cause the plague, but rather it was "the result of an angry God striking at the Christian people

for their sins.” He also accused some of those leading the pogroms of hoping to escape debts that they owed to Jewish moneylenders.

As the hysteria quieted down, some Christians turned their anger at the Catholic Church, which seemed helpless to stop the Black Death. In fact, many local priests either died of the plague or abandoned their parishes when it struck. The church’s failure led to thousands of people joining the Flagellant Movement.

Bands of several hundred Christian men marched and sang hymns from town to town in a ritual of repentance for their sins. They wore hooded white cloaks with a red Christian cross.

When they arrived at a town’s main church, they stripped to the waist, formed a moving circle, and chanted prayers. As they did this, they beat themselves with a whip, consisting of a stick with three leather straps, each with a piece of sharp metal knotted at the end. Periodically, the bleeding flagellants (persons who whip themselves) would fall down and lay on the ground in the shape of a cross. Crowds gathered to watch the spectacle. A master of the flagellants finally read a “Heavenly Letter,” calling for all to repent their sins and plead with God to end the terrible plague.

The Flagellant Movement was a direct challenge to the authority of the Catholic Church. Pope Clement VI condemned it as a form of heresy (against church beliefs) in 1349. By the following year, as the plague faded in Western Europe, the Flagellant Movement disappeared.

### **After the Black Death**

Before the Black Death in Europe, the population had grown to about 75–80 million people. Farm production barely met the needs of most people to subsist (survive day to day), causing widespread poverty. When wheat and other crops failed, malnutrition and famine brought widespread suffering.

The Black Death greatly reduced the population of Europe. The total number of deaths is estimated at between 25 and 40 million people. With fewer people, the land could produce a surplus of food for the much lower population.

For a short period, food prices rose because of the shortage of farm labor. But the food supply soon exceeded the demand due to fewer consumers, causing lower prices.

With so many free tenant farmers, laborers, and craftsmen killed off, those who survived began to demand

lower farmland rents, higher wages, and higher prices for their handmade goods. Serfs, also reduced in large numbers, demanded reductions of feudal duties they owed to their manor lords.

Most manor lords were forced to give in to the demands of their serfs, free tenants, and laborers. In towns, craftsmen demanded higher prices for their goods. All these changes drastically cut the income of the land-owning lords.

As the lords suffered an economic decline, the lower classes enjoyed a higher standard of living. Throughout Europe, the noble elite complained that workers were greedy, lazy, and refused to work on a long-term basis. As one nobleman put it, “Servants are now masters and masters are servants.”

The nobles attempted to pass laws to put the lower classes back in their place. The Statute of Laborers, passed by the English Parliament in 1351, made it a crime for workers to accept wages higher than what they had received before the plague.

Noblemen also complained about the high prices and the fine clothes commoners were now able to buy. More laws attempted to set prices and regulate what different social classes could wear.

Some serfs, free tenants, laborers, and craftsmen resisted the attempts by the feudal lords to undercut their better living conditions. Serfs ran away, refused to be servants, and even sued their lords. The English Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 erupted after Parliament, for the first time, imposed a tax on the lower classes. Similar revolts took place throughout Europe.

Less severe plagues revisited Europe regularly for 100 years after the Black Death. This kept the population unusually low and economic conditions unusually favorable to those who barely had enough to eat before the plague.

### **Long-Term Changes**

The Black Death hastened long-term changes in Europe. The shortage of workers spurred new labor-saving inventions such as Gutenberg’s printing press. Higher incomes for more people stimulated the demand for foreign imports, which led to the exploration of long-distance trade routes.

Feudal society changed. Kings gained power over land-owning barons. The Catholic Church lost some of its authority, setting the stage for the Protestant Reformation. Serfdom disappeared in most of Western Europe by the mid-1400s.

Medicine in Europe became more open to scientific observation and evidence. Hospitals turned into places for treatment instead of merely places for people to die. Cities grew more aware of the importance of sanitation, garbage collection, and public health measures such as food inspection.

Plague epidemics ended in Europe by 1800. They disappeared entirely in the world by 1900 after Alexandre Yersin's discovery of *Y. pestis* and the flea-rat connection. His discovery led to the extermination of rats on ships and in ports and the discovery of anti-plague drugs.

*Y. pestis* still exists today, but in fleas living mainly among rodents like squirrels in isolated wilderness areas. Fewer than 200 now die of the plague worldwide each year, mainly due to lack of treatment.

### For Discussion

1. Why do you think the Black Death spread so fast and was so severe?
2. Why do you think Jewish pogroms and the Flagellant Movement arose during the Black Death in Europe?
3. The Black Death was a catastrophe for medieval Europe, killing almost half the population. What other effects did it have on Europe, positive and negative?

### For Further Reading

Aberth, John. *The Black Death, The Great Mortality of 1348-1350, A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005.

Kelly, John. *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005.

## A C T I V I T Y

### Ranking Catastrophes

Unfortunately, the modern world is not free from potential catastrophes. In fact, popular literature, movies, and the media often focus on possible disasters. Questions arise about these disasters: What are the odds they might happen? Can we do anything to prevent them? How much, in terms of resources and money, should we devote to guarding against them?

In this activity, students will evaluate the catastrophes listed below. Form small groups. Each group should do the following:

1. Read and discuss each possible catastrophe. Consider each in terms of its potential loss of life, potential impact on the world economy, potential impact on the environment, probability of happening, and possibility of doing anything about it.
2. Rank the catastrophes from 1 to 5. The number 1 is the potential catastrophe you believe is the most pressing and should have the most resources devoted to guarding against it. Number 5 is the least important.
3. Prepare to defend your group's ranking with reasoned arguments.

### Possible Catastrophes

- a. **Flu pandemic.** In 1918, a flu pandemic killed 50 million people worldwide. It was highly contagious, and the virus had mutated into a much different flu virus so people did not have immunity. Two other flu pandemics occurred in the 20th century, and another, the "swine flu," is currently underway. In these pandemics, the virus was not as lethal as in 1918, but a future strain could be.
- b. **Tsunamis.** Tsunamis are large ocean waves caused by earthquakes, volcano eruptions, or other explosions. They can devastate coastal areas. In 2004, an Indian Ocean tsunami killed more than 200,000 people.
- c. **Climate change.** Global warming causes more violent weather, rising sea levels, bigger wildfires, more animal and plant extinctions, interruptions in food production, and possible epidemics of certain diseases.
- d. **Asteroid/comet impact with earth.** About 65 million years ago, an impact collision created a crater 110 miles in diameter near the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. This changed the climate and probably led to the extinction of the dinosaurs.
- e. **Nuclear terrorism.** Terrorists may have difficulty obtaining and detonating a nuclear bomb, so the main danger probably lies in terrorists obtaining radioactive material and detonating a conventional bomb to spread the material to poison a city's population.

# The Potato Famine and Irish Immigration to America

Between 1845 and 1855 more than 1.5 million adults and children left Ireland to seek refuge in America. Most were desperately poor, and many were suffering from starvation and disease. They left because disease had devastated Ireland's potato crops, leaving millions without food. The Potato Famine killed more than 1 million people in five years and generated great bitterness and anger at the British for providing too little help to their Irish subjects. The immigrants who reached America settled in Boston, New York, and other cities where they lived in difficult conditions. But most managed to survive, and their descendants have become a vibrant part of American culture.

Even before the famine, Ireland was a country of extreme poverty. A Frenchman named Gustave de Beaumont traveled the country in the 1830s and wrote about his travels. He compared the conditions of the Irish to those of “the Indian in his forest and the Negro in chains. . . . In all countries, . . . paupers may be discovered, but an entire nation of paupers is what was never seen until it was shown in Ireland.”

In most of Ireland, housing conditions were terrible. A census report in 1841 found that nearly half the families in rural areas lived in windowless mud cabins, most with no furniture other than a stool. Pigs slept with their owners and heaps of manure lay by the doors. Boys and girls married young, with no money and almost no possessions. They would build a mud hut, and move in with no more than a pot and a stool. When asked why they married so young, the Bishop of Raphoe (a town in Ireland) replied: “They cannot be worse off than they are and . . . they may help each other.”

A major cause of Irish poverty was that more and more people were competing for land. Ireland was not industrialized. The few industries that had been established were failing. The fisheries were undeveloped, and some fishermen could not even buy enough salt to preserve their catch. And there was no agricultural industry. Most of the large and productive farms were owned by English Protestant gentry who collected rents and lived abroad. Many owners visited their property only once



*An illustration of famine victims drawn for the Illustrated London News in 1847. The artist was Irishman James Mahony (1810–1879). (Wikipedia)*

or twice in their lifetime. Their property was managed by middlemen, who split up the farms into smaller and smaller sections to increase the rents. The farms became too small to require hired labor. By 1835, three quarters of Irish laborers had no regular employment of any kind. With no employment available, the only way that a laborer could live and support a family was to get a patch of land and grow potatoes.

Potatoes were unique in many ways. Large numbers of them could be grown on small plots of land. An acre and a half could provide a family of six with enough food for a year. Potatoes were nutritious and easy to cook, and they could be fed to pigs and cattle and fowl. And families did not need a plough to grow potatoes. All they needed was a spade, and they could grow potatoes in wet ground and on mountain sides where no other kinds of plants could be cultivated.

More than half of the Irish people depended on the potato as the main part of their diet, and almost 40 percent had a diet consisting almost entirely of potatoes, with some milk or fish as the only other source of nourishment. Potatoes could not be stored for more than a year. If the potato crop failed, there was nothing to replace it. In the years before 1845, many committees and commissions had issued reports on the state of Ireland, and all predicted disaster.

## The Blight Strikes

In the summer of 1845, the potato crop appeared to be flourishing. But when the main crop was harvested in October, there were signs of disease. Within a few days after they were dug up, the potatoes began to rot. Scientific commissions were set up to investigate the problem and recommend ways to prevent the decay. Farmers were told to try drying the potatoes in ovens or to treat them with lime and salt or with chlorine gas. But nothing worked. No matter what they tried, the potatoes became diseased: “six months provisions a mass of rottenness.”

In November, a scientific commission reported that “one half of the actual potato crop of Ireland is either destroyed or remains in a state unfit for the food of man.” By early spring of 1846, panic began to spread as food supplies disappeared. People ate anything they could find, including the leaves and bark of trees and even grass. Lord Montaeagle reported to the House of Lords in March, people were eating food “from which so putrid and offensive an effluvia issued that in consuming it they were obliged to leave the doors and windows of their cabins open,” and illnesses, including “fever from eating diseased potatoes,” were beginning to spread.

The blight did not go away. In 1846, the whole potato crop was wiped out. In 1847, a shortage of seeds led to fewer crops, as only about a quarter of the land was planted compared to the year before. The crop flourished, but not enough food was produced, and the famine continued. By this time, the mass emigration abroad had begun. The flight to America and Canada continued in 1848 when the blight struck again. In 1849, the famine was officially at an end, but suffering continued throughout Ireland.

## The Famine Takes Its Toll

More than 1 million people died between 1846 and 1851 as a result of the Potato Famine. Many of these died from starvation. Many more died from diseases that preyed on people weakened by loss of food. By 1847, the scourges of “famine fever,” dysentery, and diarrhea began to wreak havoc. People streamed into towns, begging for food and crowding the workhouses and soup kitchens. The beggars and vagrants who took to the roads were infected with lice, which transmit both typhus and “relapsing fever.” Once fever took hold, people became more susceptible to other infections including dysentery.

Little, if any, medical care was available for the sick. Many of those who tried to help died too. In one

province, 48 medical men died of fever, and many clergymen died as well.

## Nowhere to Turn

Many Irish believe that the British government should have done more to help Ireland during the famine. Ireland had become part of Great Britain in 1801, and the British Parliament, sitting in London, knew about the horrors being suffered. But while the potato crop failed and most Irish were starving, many wealthy landlords who owned large farms had large crops of oats and grain that they were exporting to England. Meanwhile, the poor in Ireland could not afford to buy food and were starving. Many believe that large numbers of lives would have been saved if the British had banned those exports and kept the crops in Ireland.

But stopping food exports was not acceptable to the Whig Party, which had taken control of the British Parliament in 1846. The Whigs believed in “laissez faire” economics. (Laissez-faire is a French word meaning “let do” or “let it alone.”) Laissez-faire economists believe that the state shouldn’t get involved in transactions between private parties. Instead, the government should interfere as little as possible in the economy. Because of their belief in laissez-faire economics, members of the Whig government refused to stop landlords from exporting oats and grain while the poor were starving. The Whig Party also shut down food depots that had been set up and stocked with Indian corn.

The British government did take some steps to help the poor. Before the famine, in 1838, the government had passed a Poor Law Act. It established 130 workhouses for the poor around the country, funded by taxes collected from local landlords and farmers.

Conditions in the workhouses were grim. Families lived in crowded and miserable conditions, and men were forced to work 10 hours a day cutting stone. Many people avoided workhouses if they could because moving in meant almost certain illness and likely death.

The government also established a public-works program. The program was supposed to be run by local committees that would employ laborers to build railroads and other public-works projects. The British government advanced money for the projects, but the local committee members had to sign a contract promising to repay the British government in two years (plus interest).

The projects were too few to support the hundreds of thousands of desperate families that needed help. Most

of the workers—including women and children who were put to work building stone roads—were malnourished and weakened by fever, and many fainted or dropped dead as they worked.

In early 1847, about 700,000 Irish worked on projects, but did not earn enough money to eat. Between March and June of 1847, the government shut down the public-works projects. In their place, Parliament passed the Soup Kitchen Act in January 1847. The Soup Kitchen Act was intended to provide free food in soup kitchens sponsored by local relief committees and by charity.

Free food was desperately needed. In July 1847, almost 3 million people were lining up to get a “vile soup” or a “stirabout” porridge consisting of Indian corn meal and rice. For most of the poor, this was the only food they had each day, and many were still dying of starvation. By September 1847, the local relief committees that operated the soup kitchens were almost bankrupt, and the government shut down the soup kitchens after only six months. With no more soup kitchens to feed starving people, little hope was left.

### Leaving for America

Driven by panic and desperation, a flood of emigrants left Ireland in 1847. Many left dressed in rags with not enough food to last the 40-day journey across the Atlantic and not enough money to buy food sold on board. Some went to Great Britain and to Australia, but most intended to go to America. Because fares on the Canadian ships were cheaper, many emigrants went by way of Canada and walked across the border into Maine and then south through New England.

The emigrants traveled on Canadian “timber” ships, which carried lumber from Canada to Europe and would otherwise have returned empty. The shipowners were happy to carry human ballast, but their ships were not equipped for passenger travel. The conditions on the timber ships were horrible. One philanthropist, named Stephen de Vere, traveled as a steerage passenger in the spring of 1847 and described the suffering he saw:

Hundreds of poor people, men, women and children of all ages, from the driveling idiot of ninety to the babe just born, huddled together without air, wallowing in filth and breathing a fetid atmosphere, sick in body, dispirited in heart . . . dying without voice of spiritual consolation, and buried in the deep without the rites of the church.

The Canadian ships became known as “coffin ships” because so many emigrants died during passage or after they reached land and were put into quarantine. One



*A family waves goodbye to loved-ones emigrating from Ireland. The illustration is from a 19th century book on Irish history. (Wikimedia Commons)*

expert has calculated that almost 30 percent of the 100,000 immigrants to Canada in 1847 died on the ships or during quarantine, and another 10,000 died on their way to the United States. Others who could afford the fare traveled directly to New York on American ships where conditions were much better. Some were already suffering from fever and were kept in quarantine on Staten Island. But the vast majority of immigrants who came between 1845 and 1855 did survive the journey.

### No Irish Need Apply

Almost all of the Irish who immigrated to America were poor peasants from rural counties. Most were illiterate, and many spoke only Irish and could not understand English. And although they had lived off the land in their home country, the immigrants did not have the skills needed for large-scale farming in the American West. Instead, they settled in Boston, New York, and other cities on the East Coast. The men took whatever jobs they could find—loading ships at the docks, sweeping streets, cleaning stables. The women took jobs as servants to the rich or working in textile factories. Most stayed in slum tenements near the ports where they arrived and lived in basements and attics with no water, sanitation, or daylight. Many children took to begging, and men often spent what little money they had on alcohol.

The Irish immigrants were not well-liked and often treated badly. The large number of new arrivals strained the cities’ resources. (The 37,000 Irish immigrants who arrived in Boston in 1847 increased the city’s population by more than 30 percent.) Many unskilled workers feared being put out of work by Irish immigrants willing to work for less than the going rate.

The Irish also faced religious prejudice as almost all of them were Catholic. With the large number of Irish immigrants flooding into the cities, Catholicism came

close to being the largest single Christian denomination in the country. Many Protestants feared that the Irish were under the power of the Pope and could never be truly patriotic Americans. The press described Irish immigrants as “aliens” who were mindlessly loyal to their Catholic leaders. As anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment grew, newspaper advertisements for jobs and housing routinely ended with the statement: “No Irish need apply.”

Because of discrimination, the Irish-Catholic immigrants tended to stay together in small communities—or “ghettos.” They sought refuge in religion and began to donate to their local parishes to build schools and churches. But by 1860, with the advent of the Civil War, America’s attention shifted to the issue of slavery, and discrimination against the Irish began to decline. The Know-Nothing Party, which was founded in the 1850s to prevent Irish immigration, split up and lost all of its support. Large numbers of Irish Catholics who had enlisted in the Union Army and fought bravely at the battles of Antietam and Gettysburg came back from the war and found that things were beginning to change.

### From the Ghetto to the White House

As America became more industrialized after the Civil War, Irish laborers found new, and better-paid, work. Many worked building railroads and in factories and mines. They helped organize trade unions and led strikes for shorter hours and better pay. And many became involved in local political machines and began to play a role in city and state politics. The political machines, like Tammany Hall in New York, were associated with the Democratic Party and ran many of the big cities. In return for their political support, the Tammany Hall bosses helped immigrants through the naturalization process and even provided necessities like food and coal in time of emergency. The Irish Catholics ran Tammany Hall for years and helped many poor immigrant groups, including Poles, Italians, and Jews, as well as their own.

The Irish rose out of the ghetto not only because of politics, but also because of education. As the families of Irish immigrants became more prosperous, they were able to send their children to Catholic parochial schools run by the local parishes. After graduation from high school, many went on to college and then into careers in medicine, law, and business. By 1900, only 15 percent of Irish-American men were still unskilled workers. By the 1920s, the Irish had spread into all spheres of American life. And in 1960, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the great-grandson of a famine immigrant, was elected president of the United States.

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Abraham Lincoln once said: “I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father’s child has.” The election of John Fitzgerald Kennedy as president in 1960 showed that the Irish Catholics had been assimilated into American culture and had left the misery of the Potato Famine behind them. Waves of other immigrants, fleeing poverty and persecution, have followed in their footsteps and slowly found acceptance, and success, in America.

### For Discussion

1. Before the famine, what was life like in Ireland?
2. What caused the famine? What factors made it worse?
3. In 1997, then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair issued the first apology by the British government for the famine: “Those who governed in London at the time failed their people.” Do you think the British government was at fault? Explain.
4. What problems did the Irish face in America? What factors helped them overcome these problems? Which do you think was the most important factor? Why?
5. How similar do you think is the experience of today’s immigrants to the U.S. to that of the Irish immigrants? Explain.

## A C T I V I T Y

### Immigration

In this activity, students will role play an Irish family and decide whether or not to immigrate to the United States. Form small groups. Each group should:

1. Imagine you are an Irish family during the Potato Famine deciding whether to immigrate to America.
2. Using information from the article, discuss the conditions in Ireland, the dangers of the voyage, and the conditions of Irish immigrants in America.
3. Weighing the conditions and dangers, decide whether or not you would immigrate to America.
4. Be prepared to report your decision and reasons for it.



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# The Debate Over World Population: Was Malthus Right?

In 1798, English economist Thomas Robert Malthus wrote an essay predicting that if humans did not check their fast-growing numbers, mass starvation would result. A debate over Malthus' gloomy outlook ignited during his lifetime and is still going on today.

The debate over the limits of human population growth began with Greek and other ancient thinkers. In A.D. 210, Tertullian, an early Christian scholar, wrote:

Our teeming population is the strongest evidence our numbers are burdensome to the world, which can hardly support us from its natural elements. . . . In every deed, pestilence and famine and wars have to be regarded as a remedy for nations as the means of pruning the luxuriance [large numbers] of the human race.

At the time of the American and French revolutions in the late 1700s, some English and French writers predicted unending improvement for humankind. William Godwin, an English philosopher, wrote about a bountiful earth capable of supporting the growing human population indefinitely.

Not everyone agreed with this optimistic vision of the future. Thomas Robert Malthus, a professor of economics in England, held a much more pessimistic view.

## **Malthus' Principle of Population**

In 1798, Malthus wrote *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society*. Malthus began with two "fixed laws of our nature." First, men and women cannot exist without food. Second, the "passion between the sexes" drives them to reproduce.

He explained that, if unchecked, people breed "geometrically" (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, etc.). But, he continued, the production of food can only increase "arithmetically" (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.). "The natural inequality of the two powers of population and of [food] production in the earth," he declared, "form the great difficulty that to me appears insurmountable [impossible to overcome]."

Malthus concluded: "I see no way by which man can escape from the weight of this law." In other



Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834), an English economist, believed that unchecked population growth would lead to famine and starvation. (Wikimedia Commons)

words, if people keep reproducing in an uncontrolled geometric manner, they will eventually be unable to produce enough food for themselves. The future, Malthus argued, pointed not to endless improvement for humanity, but to famine and starvation.

Malthus claimed that, if unchecked, the population of a nation or even the world would double every 25 years. He got this idea from Benjamin Franklin, who had estimated that 1 million American colonists, living in an abundant and healthy environment, would double to 2 million in 25 years.

Malthus applied this doubling rule to Britain, with a population he estimated at 7 million. He calculated that in 25 years Britain's population would reach 14 million, but food production would keep up. In another 25 years, the population would redouble to 28 million. Food production, however, increasing at the slower arithmetic rate, would only feed 21 million. Malthus recognized that his doubling rule would only apply in situations of continuous uncontrolled childbirth.

Malthus noted that the English poor added to their own misery when they married early and had too many children during good times. These children grew up to create an oversupply of workers and a drop in wages. Meanwhile, the population increase caused by their large numbers stressed food production and caused higher prices. The result, said Malthus, was hunger and a rise in child mortality (death).

Malthus argued that these conditions forced the poor to marry later and have fewer children, which brought the

population and food supply back into balance. But as soon as things got better, the poor produced greater numbers of children again, and the whole cycle started again.

Malthus contended that the only way to avoid mass starvation in the future was to check population growth to keep it equal to food production. He declared, “The superior power of population cannot be checked without producing misery and vice.” By “misery and vice,” he meant starvation, plagues, war, contraception, abortion, and the killing of infants, none of which he wanted to see happen.

Was there nothing other than “misery and vice” to control population? In his book-length 1803 revision, Malthus called for “moral restraint,” which included chastity until marriage, delayed marriage, and having fewer children (he had five).

Malthus did not believe “moral restraint” would work, especially among the poor. Even so, he supported a public tax-supported primary school system to lift the lower classes out of poverty and irresponsible breeding and into middle class self-control and responsibility.

But Malthus vehemently opposed giving government relief, such as food and shelter, to the impoverished. Making the poor comfortable, he argued, only encouraged them to have bigger families, which increased their numbers and continued their misery.

### **Malthus Debunked**

After Malthus first published his essay in 1798, a storm of criticism erupted. The optimists called his vision of unavoidable mass starvation a “doctrine of despair.” Others condemned his call for abolishing England’s Poor Laws, which provided relief for the starving homeless. The historian Thomas Carlyle dubbed Malthus’ new subject of economics the “dismal science.”

Malthus and others who came to his defense, like economist David Ricardo, became the pessimists in the debate over the future of humanity. Over time, however, Malthus became slightly more hopeful about the future. He admitted the possibility of “gradual and progressive improvement in human society.” When he died in 1834, the population of the world stood at about 1 billion people.

Ironically, during Malthus’ lifetime, England was radically changing. The Industrial Revolution and the use of machinery in agriculture greatly multiplied what each factory and farm worker could produce.

Malthus did not foresee the possibility of opening up vast new tracks of land for cultivation by

steam-powered farm machines. Now, fewer farmers could produce more food than ever before. Thus, Malthus’ “arithmetic” increase in food production seemed far too limited.

Later on, something unexpected happened as the Industrial Revolution modernized Europe. No longer needed for agricultural labor, people moved to industrial cities. Here they discovered less need for large families than on the farm where children helped with planting, harvests, and other chores. Also, since health conditions improved, child mortality declined. People discovered they did not have to have large families to compensate for some of their children dying young.

By 1900, in many parts of Europe, the fertility rate (average number of children born per woman) began to go down. This meant smaller families. This check on population growth was one Malthus never imagined.

Demographers, who study population trends, have discovered other reasons why families get smaller when a society modernizes. As poor women from farm regions become better educated, they tend to seek work outside the home, delay marriage, and have fewer children when they do marry.

In countries that have undergone modernization, married women often choose to have a job and a family, but with only one or two children. Many parents also choose between having a large family that may cause financial struggle or a having a small family that may allow a more comfortable lifestyle.

Thus, as a nation industrializes and its people become better educated, the fertility rate seems to drop, which means smaller families and a slowing of population growth. Economists call this the “demographic transition.”

By the 20th century, improvements in agriculture had sped up food production and the “demographic transition” had slowed down population growth. The old debate between the optimists and the pessimists appeared to be over. The optimists had won, and Malthus’ *Principle of Population* seemed dead.

### **The Return of the Pessimists**

After World War II, the world’s population accelerated. It took more than 100 years for the population to grow from 1 billion in Malthus’s time to 2.5 billion 1950, an increase of 1.5 billion. It only took 25 years, however, to add another 1.5 billion between 1950 and 1975. This occurred mainly because death rates from disease fell sharply in many nations due to better health care.

*(Continued on next page)*

The increasing world population alarmed some environmentalists, who declared that since the earth's resources were limited, population had to be controlled or even reduced. Of course, this was the basic argument made by Malthus and his fellow pessimists over a century earlier.

Fears of an overpopulated planet became a hot topic when Paul and Ann Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb* in 1968. "The battle to feed all humanity is over," the Ehrlichs pronounced. "In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now."

Population numbers continued to zoom upward, doubling in 40 years from 3 billion in 1960 to 6.1 billion in 2000. In its mid-range estimate, the United Nations projects the world population to reach 8 billion by 2025 and 9.1 billion by 2050 at a pace of 78–80 million people per year. Some predict that if population numbers do not taper off in the second half of the 21st century, the world's population may reach 11–12 billion by 2100.

The driving force behind this mounting population is the high fertility of women in poor developing countries, such as Pakistan currently at 4.0 children per woman and Uganda with 5.9. (The world average is 2.5 children per woman.) Moreover, many people in these poor countries are young and have not reached child-bearing age.

In 1968, Paul and Ann Ehrlich, along with other population pessimists, argued that the world's population was outracing the food production. In the 1970s, however, biologists developed new high-yield strains of wheat, rice, and other food crops that dramatically boosted harvests, much like steam-powered farm machinery did over a century ago. Many agricultural experts called this the Green Revolution.

Thus, food production again kept up with population growth. But this came at a cost. The new high-yield seeds required chemical fertilizer and pesticides, too expensive for many farmers in poor countries. Also, the Green Revolution crops depleted soil faster, and the fertilizers and pesticides polluted waterways.

The Green Revolution may have prevented the mass-starvation predicted in *The Population Bomb*, but the pessimists point to local and regional famines that still kill millions of people today when droughts, floods, and pests destroy crops. In addition, climate change



People jam onto a train in Bangladesh, a poor Asian country that has suffered famines and natural disasters. (Wikimedia Commons/Mikael655)

may intensify these threats. In 2010, an unprecedented drought and wildfires destroyed much of the wheat crop in Russia, a major world grain exporter.

The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that 20 percent of the people in poor developing countries are "chronically undernourished." The FAO also states that food production must increase by 70 percent to feed adequately the 9 billion people expected to inhabit the planet by 2050. The pessimists doubt that science has enough time to find and cross-breed genes from wild plants to develop new high-yield food crops.

Today, the population pessimists emphasize the environmental damage and depletion of natural resources caused by an overpopulated planet. They point to eroded and exhausted farmland, pollution, shrinking forests, and declining non-renewable energy like oil. Currently, Egypt and neighboring African countries with some of the highest fertility rates in the world are battling over how much water from the Nile each should get for irrigated farming.

The pessimists argue that the "demographic transition" takes a long time to develop. In many countries, cultural and religious traditions stand in the way, especially blocking any changes in the role of women.

Even as the fertility rate drops in countries going through the "demographic transition," the pessimists contend, the resulting smaller but wealthier families typically consume more of the earth's resources. They have richer diets and live in bigger houses. Imagine every Chinese adult in a country of 1.3 billion people owning and driving a car.

How many people can the earth support? Recent researchers have tied their estimates to some level of well-being for the earth's inhabitants, including such things as diet, shelter, possession of manufactured goods, etc. Most of these estimates put the earth's "carrying capacity" at between 4 and 16 billion people.

About 40 years after Paul and Ann Ehrlich published the *Population Bomb*, the world's population has nearly doubled again. The pessimists call for stepped up U.N. and national programs to bring down the fertility rate in poor developing countries. Men and women, say the pessimists, need instruction on family planning, delayed marriage, and the economic advantages of smaller families as well as easy access to contraceptives.

### The Optimists Strike Back

Today's population optimists point out that while the total number of people in the world is still going up, the yearly *rate* of population growth has been declining sharply, except in poor developing countries. The optimists expect the world's population to peak at about 9 billion in 2050 and then gradually go down.

Optimists say that the decrease in the world fertility rate has been even more dramatic: 4.9 children per woman in 1950 to 2.5 in 2010. Fertility rates have dropped the fastest in developed countries like Germany and Japan.

The optimists predict that by 2050 a majority of countries, including many poor developing ones, will be at or under the 2.1 fertility replacement level. This level occurs when parents, on average, have just enough children to replace themselves. (The .1 is a statistical adjustment to account for girls who die before childbearing age.)

The optimists argue that if we have a population problem in the future, it will be because fertility rates are too low in many nations. Developed countries like Germany and Japan already have fertility rates below the replacement level. They are facing the challenges

of a decreasing and older population, labor shortages, and a shrinking economy. One solution for countries with negative population growth would be to encourage more young immigrants, who can increase the workforce and pay taxes to support the aging native population.

Unlike most other developed countries, the United States is on track to have a steadily rising population through 2050 even though its fertility rate has been below the replacement level since the 1970s. Demographers say the U.S.'s population will rise because of continuing immigration.

The widespread famines and mass-starvation predicted in *The Population Bomb* never happened. The optimists say the world now produces more food on less land than ever before. Still, large areas of land suitable for farming have yet to be cleared for cultivation.

The optimists point to the Green Revolution, which boosted world food production 250 percent. As a result, food prices have gone down, calories per person are up, and malnourishment is more the result of stalled economic development and wars. In the meantime, life expectancy around the world has steadily climbed.

As for threats to the environment and depletion of resources, the optimists like to quote economist Julian Simon who wrote *The Ultimate Resource* in 1981:

Human beings are not just more mouths to feed, but are productive and inventive minds that help find creative solutions to man's problems, thus leaving us better off over the long-run.

There is no reason, according to the optimists, why inventive scientists and others cannot develop new nutritious food crops, discover energy alternatives, or use technology to heal the environment.

The optimists have long objected to the aggressive population control policies of the pessimists as unnecessarily invading the lives of people, especially poor

### World Population 1950–2050

Year	World	Developing Countries	Europe	United States
1950	2.5 billion	1.71 billion	547 million	158 million
2000	6.1 billion	4.92 billion	726 million	288 million
2010	6.9 billion	5.67 billion	732 million	318 million
2050	9.1 billion	7.87 billion	691 million	404 million

Source: Adapted from United Nations Population Division. World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision Population Database. URL: <http://esa.un.org/UNPP>

## World Fertility Rates 1950–2050

(average number of children per woman)

**Replacement Level=2.1**

Year Range	World	Developing Countries	Europe	United States
1950–55	4.92	6.00	2.65	3.45
2000–05	2.67	2.89	1.43	2.04
2010–15	2.49	2.62	1.53	2.02
2045–50	2.02	2.05	1.80	1.85

Source: Adapted from United Nations Population Division. World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision Population Database. URL: <http://esa.un.org/UNPP>

women. For decades after World War II, the U.N. and many nations adopted policies that encouraged the use of contraceptives, voluntary sterilization, and abortion to reduce fertility in regions of high population growth.

The most extreme population control measure was China's one-child policy. This successfully reduced China's fertility to below the replacement level. The Chinese tradition of favoring boys over girls, however, led to an upsurge of abortions among some women to secure a male as their single child. This has caused an imbalance of males in China's population.

The optimists call for an end to what they call the "war on fertility." They are convinced that economic development and education, especially of women, in the high fertility developing countries will speed the "demographic transition." This will naturally reduce the fertility rate and slow population growth to enable a balance between numbers of people and the "carrying capacity" of the earth.

### For Discussion

1. What was Malthus' *Population Principle*? How did the Industrial Revolution appear to debunk it?
2. Pakistan with a current fertility rate of 4.0 is on track to see its population nearly double in the next 40 years. If this country had a choice between building dams to irrigate more farmland or increase investment in family planning to sharply reduce the fertility rate, which would you recommend? Why?
3. Make lists of the ways to control population growth suggested by Malthus, today's pessimists, and today's optimists. Pick what you think is the best suggestion from each list and explain why.

### For Further Reading

Appleman, Philip, ed. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2004.

Newbold, K. Bruce. *Population Geography, Tools and Issues*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.

## A C T I V I T Y

### Is There an Overpopulation Problem?

Divide the class into three groups to debate this question. One group will take the position of the population pessimists, one group will take the position of the population optimists, and the third group will act as a panel of judges to decide the outcome of the debate.

1. The pessimists and optimists should first discuss among themselves what their answer to the debate question is based on the information provided in the article. Then, each side should research facts and arguments from the article to support its position.
2. The panel of judges should prepare questions to ask each side during the debate.
3. The debaters for each side should share researching, presenting their case, and answering questions from the judges and the opposite side.
4. After each side has finished presenting and answering questions, the panel of judges will meet openly before the debating groups and discuss the debate question. Panel members will conclude their discussion with a vote to decide the winner of the debate.

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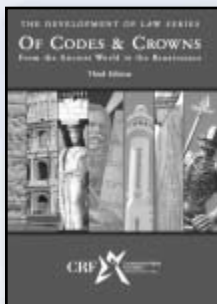
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