

Political Routes to Starvation

Why Does Famine Kill?

Bas Dianda

Vernon Series in Politics



VERNON PRESS

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www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street,
Suite 1200, Wilmington,
Delaware 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Vernon Series in Politics

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018938193

ISBN: 978-1-62273-309-5

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List of Acronyms

ARA	American Relief Administration
CAR	Central African Republic
CPI	Corruption Perception Index
DERG	Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police and Territorial Army
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECHO	European Community Humanitarian Office
EU	European Community
FAD	Food Availability Decline
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FED	Food Entitlement Decline
FED-Famine	Food Entitlement Decline Famine
FMG	Federal Military Government (Nigeria)
FPD	Food Production Decline
FPD-Famine	Food Production Decline Famine
IDA	International Development Association
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INR	Indian Rupee
LIA	Little Ice Age
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NEP	New Economic Policy
NHCR	Nation High Commissioner for Refugees
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NDA	Niger Delta Avengers
NKVD	Norodny Kommissariat Vnutrennikh Del (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs)
NON-FDP Famine	Non Food Production Decline Famine
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PAP	Presidential Amnesty Program
PEM	Protein-Energy Malnutrition
SCF	Standby Credit Facility
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement (South Sudan)
SPLM-N	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (Kordofan)
TFG	Transitional Federal Government
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (Now, United Nations Children's Fund)

USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WFP	World Food Program

Famines Quoted in this Book ¹

Agra Famine in 1838
Aleppo 2016
Anatolian Famine 1873-1875
Arab Peninsula 640 AD
Bangladesh Famine 1974
Bengali Famine 1769-1770
Bengal Famine 1943
Biafra Famine 1968
Cambodian Famine 1977-1978
Chalisa Famine 1783
Chinese Famine 1907
Czech Famine 1770-1771
Darfur Famine 1984-1985
Deccan Famine 1630-1632
Dutch Famine 1944
Egypt 3500 BC
Egypt 180 BC
Egypt 1784
Estonia 1695-1697
Ethiopian Famine 1888-1892
Ethiopia 1984-1985
Europe 1315-1317
European Famine 1816-1817
Finland 1695-1697
French Famine 1693-1694
French Famine 1709-1710
French Famine 1775
Great Bengal Famine 1769-1770
Great Leap Forward 1958-1961
Great Persian Famine 1870
Greek Famine 1942
Henan Famine 874 AD
Henan Famine in 1593
Henan Famine 1942-1943
Hunan Famine 1929
Holodomor 1932-1933
Iceland Famine 1783
Indian Famine 1896-1897

Indian Famine 1889-1900
Indonesian Famine 1815
Iranian Famine 1917
Irish Famine 1740-1741
Irish Famine 1845-1852
Jerusalem Famine 70 AD
Leningrad 1941
Madras Famine 1876-1878
Malawi Famine 2002
Mount Lebanon Famine 1915
Nigeria Famine 1913
Nigerian Food Crisis (ongoing)
Niger Crisis 2004 and 2005
Northern Chinese Famine 1876-1879
Nuba Mountain Siege
Orissa Famine 1866-1867
Persian Famine 1870
Prussian Famine 1709
Rajputana Famine 1868-1869
Rome 400 BC
Russia Famine 1601-1603
Russian Famine 1921
Russian Famine 1946
Rwanda Famine 1943
Rwanda Famine 1989
Scottish Famine 1695-1700
Skull Famine
Somali Famine 1991-1993
Somali Famine 2010-2012
Stalingrad 1942
Sweden Famine 1650
Sweden Famine 1696
Sweden Famine 1866-1868
Tenmei Famine (Japan) 1782-1788
Tenpo Famine (Japan) 1833-1837
Thirty Years' War Famine 1618-1648
Uganda Famine 1980
Upper Doab Famine 1860-1861
Vienna Famine 1683
Vietnam Famine 1945
Year without Summer 1816
Zimbabwe 2003

Preface

The perspective adopted by the *Political Routes to Starvation* in dealing with food crises serves a triple purpose that can be summarized as follows:

To introduce a new classification of famine aimed at offering a comprehensive and correct overview of the topic.

To restore the actual meaning of the concept of starvation, bringing it back to its original collocation within the medical terminology.

To investigate the routes to famine as well as the routes to starvation; namely, those processes that may come to affect the nutritional capacity of a community and, above all, those routes that turn food shortage into mass tragedies.

The topic of food crises is not simple at all. All too often it is oversimplified and reduced to the bare essentials. In truth, the linear relationship “lack of food-famine” cannot provide an effective comprehension of the subject that requires a detailed investigation into both the multiple routes leading to food shortage and their possible developments. This is the sole way to shed light over an issue characterized by complex features and broad scope. Conversely, interpretations based on a unique frame of reference have regularly proved insufficient to provide an explanation applicable to all famines. The academic world has put forward theories demanding to include any food crisis into a single scheme, which from time to time has been identified with natural adversities, climatic change, overpopulation, economic determinants or warfare. They are all true causes of famine but none of them can be held as the cause of all famines. So, the complexity of the topic invites to press the reset button and face the subject from the beginning; namely, from the three basic questions related to the issue:

- “What is a famine?”
- “How does famine occur?”
- “Why does famine kill?”

The third is the pursued question throughout this book and the answer is neither clinical nor humanitarian but just political. It is worth stressing that the theme can be explored through three different viewpoints:

-Humanitarian. This is the approach of aid workers as well as whoever is moved by feelings of empathy for human suffering and sympathizes with communities in a predicament.

-Medical. It corresponds to the professional tackling of diseases in terms of research, diagnosis and proper therapies.

-Political. The political investigation of famines aims at tracing both foundation and concomitant causes of them. However, an inclusive analysis should also take into account their background, development and duration; finally, to delve into the topic even deeper, it is essential to understand in which way a food crisis may turn into mass starvation. Since such evolution is always avertable, there must be necessarily a specific reason behind it and unescapably, the progression from a food crisis to humanitarian catastrophe occurs on political grounds. "*Political Routes to Starvation*", thus, is a political book. It approaches the subject of famine politically while the medical as well as humanitarian perspective have been essentially omitted. The next chapters will leave large room to food crises that occurred in the past and yet it would be wrong to regard this work as a historical research. Famines of the previous centuries have been considered with the aim of gaining knowledge of those processes leading to the tragedy and, furthermore, food crises are not historical incidents at all.

The routes to starvation will be investigated sparing no effort to simplify a multifaceted topic through schematizations, figures, and tables that have frequently been inserted to ease the comprehension of the subject.

Finally, some harshness is inevitable in facing topics that entails great suffering and death. Famine is hunger pangs growing into severe mental torment; then, in physical exhaustion and finally, if unopposed, into death. Starvation kills. It claims the lives of its victims directly or predisposing them to deadly infectious diseases. Macabre accounts of the desperate struggle for survival have filled thousands and thousands of pages and scores of books have been written on the subject; consequently, there is no need to go ahead along these lines. The investigation carried out through this book focuses on the routes leading to famine rather than on the aspects related to its full-blown stages. In this perspective, "*Political Routes to Starvation*" could appear structured as a cold inquiry, while nobody who is confronting such an issue may be exempted from paying a personal price for a tragedy that, together with warfare, represents the most stable plague harassing humanity.

Plan of the Work

“Political Routes to Starvation” focuses on the genesis of acute food crises.

The first section of this book sets a new classification of famine by downgrading the old concept of FAD (Food Availability Decline) on account of its genericity. FAD is an acronym with a very broad scope and includes multiple sources of food shortage, which range from poor agricultural production to flaws within the food supply chain (transportation of produce, its distribution and more). Since this work deals with the topic of acute undernourishment trying to carry out an in-depth analysis of it, the distinction between food crises resulting from insufficient agricultural output (FPD Famines) and the others is held to be essential; accordingly, the tendency to downplay diverse origins of famine into an untidy jumble of indistinct causes is totally rejected.

Grounds for famine are always multiple and similarly, several processes are active in steering the evolution of famine into starvation. Acute undernourishment, as other complex tragedies, results from the combination of more elements and various flawed situations; nonetheless, they are not equal in terms of force and their impact on the end result is different. The genesis of famine, therefore, is diverse from case to case as per the prevalence of one causative factor over any other. *“Political Route to Starvation”* has been arranged in ten sections just on the basis of the classic distinction between foundation and concomitant causes, each of them consistent with the component held to be key in the genesis of a group of famines.

The analysis is inclusive: climatic, political, economic, demographic and even other processes that set the basic framework of famines have been considered. Any part is provided with related explanations, figures and specific examples. Although the book draws heavily on past incidents, this work cannot be considered as a history investigation giving that the focus always revolves around food crises, their origins and development. Eventually, the last part leaves room to an assessment of the current situation and its possible developments.

If *“Political Route to Starvation”* faces the topic of food crisis adopting a different viewpoint from the old understanding of famine (FAD/Non-FAD), it addresses with some scepticism also the current all-encompassing economic interpretation of famine and without any ambition to be a revolutionary text, extends the genesis of acute undernourishment to multiple processes.

Since this work acknowledges that economic factors carry an important weight in the development of food crises, it commits several chapters to their detailed analysis; nonetheless, for the purpose of identifying all the foundation causes of famine, *Political Routes to Starvation* expands the scope of its investigation beyond rigid perspectives, which always entail the risk of overlooking the variability that lies behind complex issues. In this regard, though economic aspects may be a prime source of food crises (FED), in this book they are mostly considered as aggravating causes of famines, which more often have their starting point in different processes.

The usual terminology has been revisited to accord terms with the causative scheme adopted in the text. Famine does not necessarily coincide with Starvation and the following chapters, without exception, set clear boundaries between them. This does not occur in the pursuit of linguistic excellence but rather to apply the proper definition to different situations.

Several figures have been added to underline, through suitable outlines, the most important issues and endnotes have been inserted at the end of the book. They are a useful instrument for additional knowledge and for references.

This work, therefore, delves into the genesis of famine trying to put forth a more inclusive perspective of the topic, different from both the oldest and the newest prevailing theories.

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55. 1943-Rwanda Famine

The Rwanda Famine was both Warfare and Colonial Famine. It was one of the last colonial famines that occurred against the backdrop of World War II; namely, the most devastating conflict of human history. In 1943, World War II was at its peak and governments of the countries involved in fighting had to face serious issues to supply the large armies deployed on the battlefield. The provision for the troops included large amounts of ammunition, petrol, food and other items essential to the military forces; accordingly, colonies became an important source of supplies and one of the foundation causes of the Rwandan famine lay just in the forced extraction of goods.

In 1919, in the aftermath of World War I, Rwanda and Burundi became colonial territories of the Belgian rule, whose mandate was confirmed in 1923 by La Societe des Nations.

The famine, however, was not only due to warfare and colonial policies but also adverse climatic conditions.

Rwanda is a prone-famine country for multiple reasons. First, it is since ever overpopulated. Even nowadays, the population density of the country is 444 inhabitants for a square kilometer, which is one of the highest in Africa. The second feature that renders Rwanda prone to famine lies in its weather pattern. It includes two cycles of annual dryness: the summer-spell stretches from June to September and the other, which is less intense, from December to January. Obviously, a double period of scarce precipitation heightens the exposure to devastating droughts, giving that it is enough even a limited variation that extends the dry spells to bring about severe harvest failures.

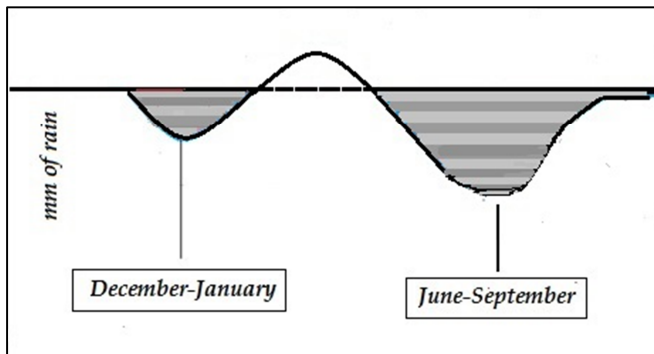


Figure 55.1 Weather Pattern in Rwanda

The famine started in October 1943 and ended in December 1945.

During the interwar period, the colonial rule had tried to improve the state of backwardness prevailing in the colony. Construction works had been carried out to provide the country with some basic infrastructure and agricultural reforms had been implemented to increase crop production; in addition, the colonial government had sought to develop an elementary education system and introduce some public services. Nevertheless, the positive approach of the Belgian government was upset by the outbreak of World War II that urged the rule to follow very different lines. The need to support the war effort came inevitably to the fore and colonial authorities had to replace its constructive attitude with predatory policies that drew heavily on the country's resources. Rwanda was not directly involved in fighting and no battle took place on its territory; still, it had to give a substantial contribution to the conflict as supplier.

Many farmers were diverted from agriculture to production of goods like bricks that the European factories, destroyed by bombing or transformed in war manufacture, had ceased to produce. Other cultivators had to modify their farming activity and allocate part of their cropland to the production of agricultural commodities needed to feed both the Belgian army, whose size had been strongly increased, and the Belgian population, who was in the grip of food shortage. Cassava and sweet potatoes, beans and peas, coffee and tea were largely shipped to Europe to compensate for warfare scarcity. Finally, the colonial rule imposed on the sector a significant production of cash crop and precisely, the cultivation of vegetable fiber plants. The Rwandan farmers, thus, suffered a major blow, considering that the large and brusque switch imposed by the rulers on farming came at the expense of subsistence crops.

Meanwhile, drought was ravaging the country since a couple of years and paved the way for an infestation of *Phytophthora* (potato blight.) As in 1943, the blight devastated the harvest of sweet potato, which was a staple of the Rwandan diet, the situation became critical and shipments to Europe of agricultural supplies began to shrink. The Belgian administration resorted to forced confiscations and military units began to scour village after village for foodstuffs. Therefore, the small stores of the Rwandan households were seized and taken away forcibly, leaving entire communities to fend for themselves against the famine.

Starvation generated a large tide of Rwandan refugees, who fled across the border into neighboring countries. Many reached the Belgian Congo, where the agricultural output could barely meet the alimentary needs of the local population. As a result, the large flow of people from the Rwandan food crisis ignited a fierce competition for resources, which brought about hostilities between the Congolese and the newcomers. Violent incidents occurred at a

growing pace and clashes became so sustained that the country plunged into a dangerous condition of instability.

The death toll of the famine is not known exactly. Estimates placed figures at 50,000 dead but several Scholars assumed that the number of fatalities was greater. Difficulties in calculating the excess of mortality resulted from the unreliability of the records of birth and deaths, which in many African countries were often neglected. Accordingly, the underestimation of actual size of the population at the outset of the famine could have also led to understate blatantly the actual number of victims.

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