Drought and Famine: Crash Course World History #208

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course World History. Today we're going to talk about drought and famine.

Really, Stan? When are we going to talk about peace and happiness? I feel like we've been on kind of a sad run here at Crash Course.

You know what, actually I'm gonna talk about peace and happiness, but not until the very end. In the mean time, drought and famine.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! This is science again. Famines are just natural disasters, they happen sometimes.

Yeah, Me From the Past, no. For the most part, famines have historically been man-made disasters.

So Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen commented that, "starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there not being enough to eat."

In other words, people starve it's often because they are unable to obtain food that might be available somewhere in their vicinity.

The issue isn't existence of resources, it's access to resources.

And there are a lot of ways that humans can contribute to famines. Right, like, take governments.

Sometimes governments just do a bad job of providing relief to starving people. Other times, they have deliberate policies that lead to starvation.

The most obvious example of that being Stalin's collectivization and subsequent terror which killed millions of Ukrainians and Russians between 1932 and 1933. There's also Mao's Great Leap Forward which caused famines which killed up to 10 million Chinese people in the late 1950's.

And in the Capitalist world market forces can cause famines, such as when there's enough food to keep people from starving but they can't afford to buy it.

Shortages or panic cause prices to go up, then people who can afford to pay end up hoarding resources and people who can't afford to pay end up starving.

Now, drought and other natural disasters can create shortages but hoarding makes them much worse. Think about the price of bottled water in Florida when a hurricane is about to hit.

But of course, when it comes to the disaster of famine, people can't do it alone. We need weather's help.

Okay, so here's a map of famines. You'll notice that they often occur in what historians sometimes call the global south.

Good job with the naming there, historians. I might have called it The Drought Belt. Or the, ah, Southern Hemisphere.

Southern latitudes are more effected by weather related to El Niño. El Niños affects wind and rain patterns and they're associated with weak monsoons and droughts is parts of Asia, Africa and north-eastern South America.

By the way, the fact that north-eastern South America is a grammatically correct phrase in English indicates that there is SOMETHING WRONG with historians and naming!

Right, but my point is that weak monsoons can be devastating to agriculture in Asia. If the spring rains don't come, the wheat crop will be poor and if the summer monsoon fails the entire year's harvest can be lost.

And El Niño also contributes to famine in East Africa where it accounts for about 50 percent of the variance in rainfall. Now, El Niño probably contributed to recent famines such as the one in China between 1957 and 1959 that's associated with Mao's Great Leap Forward, but we're going to focus on some perhaps lesser known food disasters. Especially the ones that occurred in India, in the late 19th century.

India was Britain's most populous and most important colony in the 19th century and also the scene of it's greatest colonial failure, which is really saying something.

The famines that struck India in the last quarter of the 19th century claimed millions of lives and they highlight the devastating combination of market forces, government policy, ideology, and bad weather.

Now, it's tempting to blame those devastating famines on the severe El Niño events that occurred in those years, but it's important to note that there have been El Niños that didn't result in famine and also famines that aren't related to El Niño.

When studying history - and also when doing anything else - we seem to have this urge to essentialize, to find, like, the one secret cause of terrible or great things. I understand that urge to find the one true problem, because then maybe we could find the true solution but it just doesn't work that way. The truth is always nuanced.

Okay, 'till about 1800's, India was the world's leader in textile production with the industry employing millions of people with wages that, while not extravagant, were more than enough to avoid starvation. This was largely due to the fact that food prices were low because Indian agriculture was very productive.

And then, the British happened.

Let's go to the thought bubble.

As industrial manufacturing took off in Britain the labor intensive Indian textile industry couldn't compete. So, former Indian textile workers turned to growing cotton for export which required land, seed and fertilizer, which cost money. And that drove many Indian cotton farmers into debt.

Government policy made things worse, especially tax policies.

Now, I like taxes, when they pay for things like schools and infrastructure, but taxes can be bad when they fall on those least able to pay them. In British-India colonial taxes forced peasants further into the market economy because they had to be paid in cash.

Now, to service that debt, and pay all those taxes with money, Indian farmers needed a cash crop which meant yet more land devoted to cotton and less land devoted to growing food.

During the 1876 to 1878 El Niño drought, British administrators continued to collect taxes which meant that Indian peasants continued to have to grow cotton instead of food. And when droughts struck again at the turn of the 20th century, the British raised taxes 24 percent and then confiscated the land of farmers that refused to pay.

Those taxes largely went pay for the British military and only rarely did Indians see a benefit.

The only area where the British did locally invest the money they collected was in railroads, but those were a mixed blessing. The railroads could have been used to alleviate famine by bringing much needed food, but usually they just shipped raw materials to markets.

In fact, during the 1876 to 1878 famine, to quote one historian, "The population decreased more rapidly where the districts were served by railways than where there were no railways."

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Oohh, it must be time for the open letter! Bet it has something to do with railroads.

Oh my gosh, it's lions! An a open letter to the Ghost and the Darkness.

Hey there, Ghost and the Darkness. You are the two most famous man eating lions of all time. But the story of why you actually ate humans turns out to be pretty fascinating.

So the British also built railroads in Africa, and in order to build them quickly, they needed lots of labor, and that labor needed lots of food. Hunters killed almost all of the available game which deprived local lion populations of food and then because there was a lot of malaria, all the people with malaria were together in a sick tent, and then the Ghost and the Darkness would go, y'know, into the sick tent and eat.

So, the Ghost and the Darkness, you're part of the reason that we see lions as these terrifying human eaters. But in fact, you were just reacting to the lion version of a man-made famine.

Best wishes, John Green.

So we've talked about how both collectivist and market economic policies can lead to famine, right?

But I think it's unfair to pin famine on one ideology or another, like the disastrous consequences of the ideologically motivated policies of Mao and Stalin are self evident. Both were totalitarian states, where collectivist policies led millions to starve.

But, liberal free trade policy can also lead to famine.

The godfather of free market capitalism, Adam Smith, asserted that, quote, "Famine has never arisen from any other cause but the violence of government attempting by improper means to remedy the inconvenience of dearth."

Stan, how come we don't use the word "dearth" more often? It was such a big dearth, gotta a great sound. It's like all the best parts of death and all the best parts of Darth Vader.

I'm sorry. We're not talking about the dearth of dearth, we're talking about famine.

So Smith blames famine on mother nature and government's efforts to alleviate suffering.

But, the famines in colonial India show us that a laissez faire approach to starvation from the government can also lead to millions of deaths.

Victorian Britons often justified their policy of doing nothing to help starving people by referring to Thomas Malthus's concept that population inevitably outstrips resources, claiming that India's population, quote, "Has a tendency to increase more rapidly than the food it raises from the soil," thus providing a natural justification for the suffering.

But to reiterate, famine isn't natural! Or at least it's not simply natural.

So, when the British did try to provide relief for famine victims, they feared that too much help would lead Indian subjects to become dependent on handouts.

So they set up work camps. Often hundreds of miles away from the worst areas of famine, where starving Indians could work to earn a ration that worked out to 1627 calories a day.

Now that, of course, isn't enough fuel to do heavy labor, so the death rates in some of these work camps reached as high as 94 percent.

Meanwhile, the British clung their ideology and their racism. Like here's a quote from Lieutenant Governor of the Bengal, Sir Richard Temple.

"The infatuation of these poor people in respect to eating the bread of idleness; their dread of marching on command to any distance from home; their preference often for extreme privation rather than the submission to even simple and reasonable orders, can be fully believed only by those who have seen or personally known these things."

Basically, he's saying that people would rather be lazy than well fed, which ignores the fact that on 1627 calories per day, no one can work.

So, I promised to talk about happiness and peace and rainbows and puppies here at the end.

Famines don't just happen naturally. Now, some famines may be the inevitable result of of drought but certainly we don't have to have as much starvation in the world as we do.

In fact, with current agricultural technologies, we don't have to have any starvation. And here's where the really is some happiness and peace and puppies and rainbows: there are fewer undernourished people today than there ever have been at any point in centuries. More people have food security and fewer people are starving.

That also isn't the result of weather. And yes, we will face tremendous droughts as the climate changes. But, as we face them let us remember that there is nothing natural about some starving while others have plenty.

In short, let's remember to look for the fingerprints of humans where we would perhaps prefer to see acts of God.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

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