Ireland in the Age of Imperialism

Directions: Read the documents below and answer the related questions.

Malthusian Theory and the Potato Famine

Thomas Malthus was an economic philosopher who believed that human population growth was limited by the forces of nature. He reasoned that the same forces that checked the population of rabbits would limit humans too: predators, harsh weather, epidemics, and starvation. Now it turns out that humans have ways of dealing with predators, we killed all the lions. Also we've got this amazing way of dealing with harsh weather that rabbits have never figured out called clothes. Not to even get in to fire and housing. So that leaves us with alien predators, disease, and starvation as the big obstacles, and Arnold Schwarzenegger already took care of the alien predators. Then we have disease. So around the time Malthus was writing, disease was becoming less dangerous to human populations. And then there's starvation, right, well we've argued in the past that starvation is generally a man-made problem. But to Malthus, it was still a natural disaster. For Malthus, uncontrolled reproduction was the central problem. Of course, his theories were proved to be completely wrong, but they played a devastating role in the Irish Potato Famine of 1846 - 1851.

Nearly 1 million Irish people died of starvation, disease, and violence during the famine, which was triggered when a fungus wiped out the one strain of potato grown in Ireland. Had Ireland's poor population had access to the thousands of other varieties of potato or aid to purchase more expensive crops, the suffering may not have been as terrible. But official English policy toward Ireland, as determined by its colonial master Charles Trevelyan, was to give no aid nor allow anyone else to give it either. He blocked American ships filled with corn from reaching the island. He allowed Irish farms that grew crops other than potatoes to sell them straight to England. Now hundreds of years of anti-Irish Catholic hatred were the roots of England's cruel policies. But Malthusian theory also played a role. In the century before 1846, Ireland's population had grown significantly, and many English thinkers saw the famine as an outcome of Malthus' predictions. From this point of view, providing food or aid to the Irish was futile, it could only delay the cycle of misery until it's downward swings scythed down even more people.

Trevelyan thus felt assured of pronouncing that the only remedy for the starving was for them to die, and let their corpses serve to remind the survivors not to have sex. Quote, "the judgment of God sent the calamity to teach the Irish a lesson and that calamity must not be too much mitigated". Trevelyan reassured people upset about the news of starving children, the real evil with which we have to contend is not the physical evil of the famine, but the moral evil of the selfish, perverse, and turbulent character of the people. So by 1852, emigration and starvation had shrunk the population of Ireland from about 6.5 million to 4 million. In 2010, the island's population was still lower than at the famine's start.

Source: “Population, Sustainability, and Malthus,” John Green, Crash Course World History
We entered a cabin. Stretched in one dark corner, scarcely visible, from the smoke and rags that covered them, were three children huddled together, lying there because they were too weak to rise, pale and ghastly, their little limbs—on removing a portion of the filthy covering—perfectly emaciated, eyes sunk, voice gone, and evidently in the last stage of actual starvation.

Source: William Bennett, 1847, quoted in Narrative of a Recent Journey of Six Weeks in Ireland

1. Was the Irish Potato Famine a natural or man-made disaster? How so?

2. What was the British policy toward the Irish during the famine? How was this policy influenced by Malthus? What other factors contributed to this policy?

The Genocide Question

The famine remains a controversial event in Irish history. Debate and discussion on the British government's response to the failure of the potato crop in Ireland, the exportation of food crops and livestock, the subsequent large-scale starvation, and whether or not this constituted genocide, remains a historically and politically charged issue.

I would draw the following broad conclusion: at a fairly early stage of the Great Famine the government's abject failure to stop or even slow down the clearances (evictions) contributed in a major way to enshrining the idea of English state-sponsored genocide in Irish popular mind. Or perhaps one should say in the Irish mind, for this was a notion that appealed to many educated and discriminating men and women, and not only to the revolutionary minority...And it is also my contention that while genocide was not in fact committed, what happened during and as a result of the clearances had the look of genocide to a great many Irish...

Source: Landlord and Tenant in Nineteenth-century Ireland, James S. Donnelly, Jr., Historian, University of Wisconsin–Madison

3. Considering what you know, do you think the Irish Potato Famine should be considered an act of genocide against the Irish by the British?

Scientific Racism and the Irish

Scientific racism is the use of scientific techniques and hypotheses to support or justify the belief in racism, racial inferiority, or racial superiority, or alternatively the practice of classifying individuals of different phenotypes into discrete races. As a category of theory, scientific racism employs anthropology (notably physical anthropology), anthropometry, craniometry, and other disciplines, in proposing anthropologic typologies supporting the classification of human populations into physically distinct human races, that might be asserted to
be superior or inferior. Scientific racism was common during the New Imperialism period (c. 1880s – 1914) where it was used in justifying White European imperialism, and it culminated in the period from 1920 to the end of World War II.

4. What makes Scientific Racism supposedly scientific?

5. What is being inferred in the image above?

In much of the pseudo-scientific literature of the day the Irish were held to be inferior, an example of a lower evolutionary form, closer to the apes than their "superiors", the Anglo-Saxons. Cartoons portrayed the Irish as having bestial, ape-like or demonic features and the Irishman, (especially the political radical) was invariably given a long or prognathous jaw, the sign, it was believed, of a lower evolutionary order, degeneracy, or criminality.

I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw [in Ireland] . . . I don’t believe they are our fault. . . . But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much. . . ."

Source: Charles Kingsley, English historian, professor, and Anglican priest, in a letter to his wife

6. What do you notice about both depictions of Irish people? What features are being exaggerated and why?
7. Read the caption under the racial comparison diagram from Harper’s Weekly, a British magazine. What is being suggested about Irish origins? Why?

8. Why do you think the British were motivated to portray the Irish as racially inferior and non-white?

### Home Rule, Rebellion, and Division

During the second half of the 1800s, opposition to British rule over Ireland took two forms. Some Irish wanted independence for Ireland. A greater number of Irish preferred **home rule**, local control over internal matters only. The British, fearful of Irish moves toward independence, refused to consider either option. One reason for Britain’s opposition to home rule was concern for Ireland’s Protestants. They feared being a minority in a country dominated by Catholics. Most Protestants lived in the northern part of Ireland, known as Ulster. Finally, in 1914, Parliament enacted a home rule bill for southern Ireland. Just one month before the plan was to take effect, World War I broke out in Europe. Irish home rule was put on hold. Frustrated over the delay in gaining independence, a small group of Irish nationalists rebelled in Dublin during Easter week, 1916. British troops put down the Easter Rising and executed its leaders. Their fate, however, aroused wider popular support for the nationalist movement. After World War I, the Irish nationalists won a victory in the elections for the British Parliament. To protest delays in home rule, the nationalist members decided not to attend Parliament. Instead, they formed an underground Irish government and declared themselves independent. The **Irish Republican Army** (IRA), an unofficial military force seeking independence for Ireland, staged a series of attacks against British officials in Ireland. The attacks sparked war between the nationalists and the British government. In 1921, Britain divided Ireland and granted home rule to southern Ireland. Ulster, or Northern Ireland, remained a part of Great Britain. The south became a dominion called the Irish Free State. However, many Irish nationalists, led by Eamon De Valera, continued to seek total independence from Britain. In 1949, the Irish Free State declared itself the independent Republic of Ireland.

Source: Linda B. Black, Roger Beck, et al., *World History: Patterns of Interaction*

9. According to the text, what were the ways the Irish people resist British rule? To what extent were they successful.

### “Come Out Ye Black and Tans”

"Come Out, Ye Black and Tans" is an Irish rebel song referring to the Black and Tans, the British paramilitary police auxiliary force infamous for their abusive treatment of civilians in Ireland during the 1920s. The lyrics are rich with references to the history of Irish nationalism and activities of the British Army throughout the world.

I was born on a Dublin street where the Royal drums do beat
And the loving English feet they tramped all over us,
And each and every night when me father’d come home tight
He’d invite the neighbors outside with this chorus:
Oh, come out you black and tans, Come out and fight me like a man
Show your wives how you won medals down in Flanders
Tell them how the IRA made you run like hell away,
From the green and lovely lanes in Killashandra.
Come tell us how you slew Those brave Arabs two by two
Like the Zulus they had spears and bows and arrows,
How you bravely slew each one With your sixteen pounder gun
And you frightened them poor natives to their marrow.

10. How does this Irish Nationalist song connect the struggle of the Irish to the “other” victims of British Imperialism?