



LECTIO PRAECURSORIA

Henrik Forsberg

Famines in Mnemohistory and National Narratives in Finland and Ireland, c. 1850–1970

For nearly a decade I have devoted my intellectual capacity to unravel what famine is and how it is represented in the public domain. Many would have us think that famine is an age-old problem. One that mainly concerns agriculturally backward societies, developing countries, and in the light of political economy and drama a dull subject, and I have had students from the beginning of a course confessing this sentiment. It has been a pleasure to see students' preconceptions falter and it is my intention of this lectio to do the same to you. I argue that our relation to famine, how we think about it and act upon it defines the essence and existence of our humanity, our human character and our identity. Famine, the struggle against hunger, is an essential part of our human story, a mirror of ourselves.

129

One of my arguments put forward in this dissertation is that the issues of what famines are and how they are represented are interlinked and inseparable from one another. To understand one end shapes our attitude towards the other end. In addition, there is a third component, that fulfils this triangle, that is identity.

In my thesis I have focused on historical famines in Finland and Ireland, which is a national frame of the social unit, well-aware that I could have framed it differently by taking a microhistory or family history perspective, or a regional or ethnic or some other identity marker to demarcate my unit of comparison. Yet the trinity holds no matter which social category we apply: Famine, Mnemohistory, Identity. So, let us explore this trinity one corner at a time. What is famine?

Famine concerns lack of food in a given time and space for a group of people. There are numerous technical methods and suggested criterions on how to assess whether a famine is taking place or not: assessment of available calories and price movements focus on food, demographic indicators like migration, births and mortality focus on populational behaviour and outcomes. What all of these have in common is that they are, beneath the surface, highly political questions: who and how many are affected by the situation in its epicentre and beyond, where and when is the epicentre, does it move, who has the political, economic and social authority, the responsibility to act?

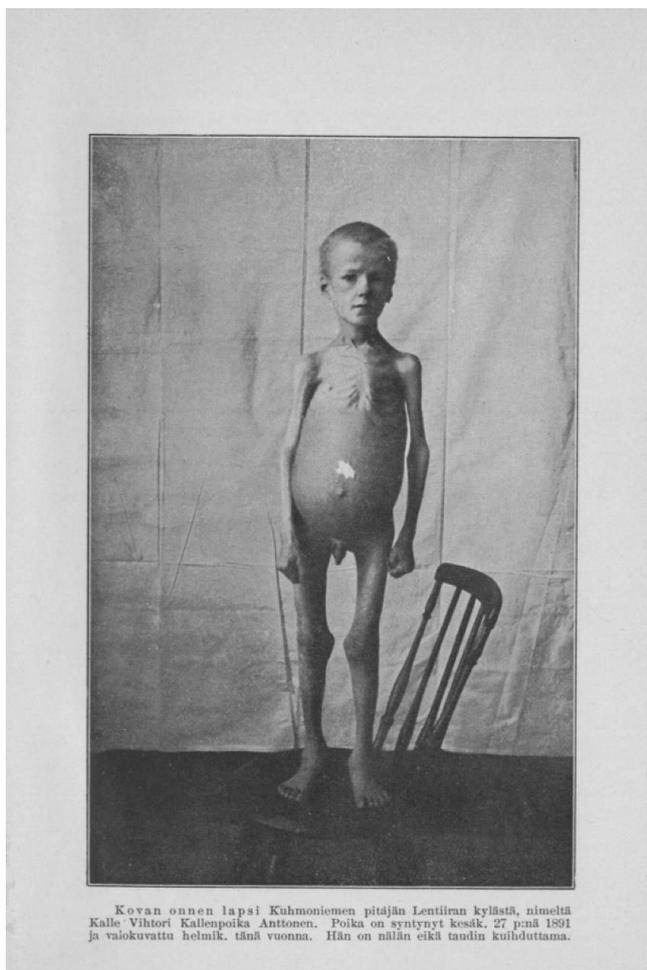
In order to detect famine, we must focus at a specific place at a specific moment. Usually, this sharpening of our gaze is determined by cognitively pre-established or ingrained ideas of administrative

borders, like nation-states or imperial states, or social and ethnic classes. This is how the media might frame famines: famine in the Soviet Union, famine in Somalia, famine in Yemen.

As an example, in 1903 *Christian Herald* reported of a famine in Finland, which was part of Imperial Russia at the time. A contemporary Finnish observer could have remarked that in fact it was only a minor famine in Kainuu, a part of the country domestically infamous for its backwardness, a “hungerland”, *nälkämaa*, and certainly the epicentre of the famine was not in the market square of Helsingfors as portrayed in this cover.

In 1903 an annually appearing worker’s journal called *Uuden ajan kynnyksellä* (At the Dawn of a New Age) reported about this famine in a sympathetic article about the hardships endured in the region.¹ The reporter narrated a story of bringing relief to a starving family and his main message was that the source of the relief originated not from God or government but from the urban poor in the south. The ideological aim of the journal was to spread and raise socialist awareness amongst the rural poor across the nation. The article was accompanied with a picture, with the following description:

“A child born to bear misfortune, named Kalle Vihtori Kallenpoika Anttonen, from Lentiira village in Kuhmoniemi parish. The boy was born in June 27th of 1891 and photographed in February of this year [1903]. He is worn out by hunger and not from disease.”



Uuden ajan kynnyksellä: Suomen työväen alpumi, 1.1.1903 nro 6, s. 107–113. Kansalliskirjaston Digitaaliset Aineistot:

<https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/aikakausi/titles/fk20090612?year=1903> (katsottu 2.3.2020).

This is a rare photographic portrayal of what famine looks like, because it is a white Finnish boy, clearly malnourished. One that looks like us, one that the majority of Finns would recognize as a Finn. Now, once you have seen this you can start to visualize how Finland in the spring 1868, when about 100.000 people were strolling around the roads begging for food or work, how they looked like. Many of them looked like this boy. In that year 137.720 people died, which constitute the highest amount of burials during a single year ever recorded in Finland's history.

Pay attention to the text "He is worn out by hunger and not from disease." Why would the reporter want to stress this aspect? My assessment is that that hunger, as a cultural trope, gathered more empathy from the contemporary reader and thus attracted higher a willingness to donate in relief schemes than a disease would have done. During this time diseases were mysterious, and their treatment required certain amount of faith or magical thinking in the efficiency of the drugs or suggested remedies. In addition, folklore and folk literature from the 1860s famine show how contemporaries mistrusted official reports on death causes during the bad times. Hunger, on the other hand, was less mysterious. It was treated by giving the patient more food in small doses and most people knew this.

The distinction between hunger or disease carries political significance too because ever since the first social hierarchies were established elites have known how to effectively respond to hunger, if they choose to do so, while if the root of the crisis is diagnosed as disease and pestilence, they can either send doctors or pray to the Gods or do both. Either way, the rich and powerful can always absolve their responsibility by arguing that giving food or applying some other form of resource redistribution will not necessarily be helpful against epidemics, and they may be right. However, if the diagnose is accepted as hunger, then the political discourse changes, as well as the form and content of the relief. The purpose of this photograph was to function as evidence to the reader that the situation in Kainuu in 1902 was one of lack of food and income, not an epidemic, consequently it could be relieved by human action. When this happens, the question of *who* the provider of relief is might become more important than the quality of the relief received.

And how did the contemporaries know that a starving human being looks like that? Well, by 1900 approximately one third of the entire population were born before the worst famine years in 1866–68, and thus the likelihood that they had seen similar images in real life around towns, roads and villages across the country was high. They could, in theory at least, remember the great famine.

This leads me to the second corner in the trinity, i.e. mnemohistory, and what I mean by it. Mnemos is Greek and means memory. The period that I have been studying encompasses one century after the famines. This includes people that could remember the famines, which with a sliding curve proportionally diminishes in numbers, and is being replaced by the rest of the population who have no personal recollection of the events. So, we have those who can remember an event and those who cannot but has to rely on other sources. For the latter, these other sources included folklore, oral histories and, in an increasingly literate society also printed histories, like for example history taught in schools.

That is why I utilized the term mnemohistory, for it includes a critical recognition that within a society some people remember what they have experienced, some what they have seen, while other people remember what they have learned and read. The difference in sensation is comparable to differences between a football player playing in the World Cup finals, the spectator at the stadium and

the reader of the postmatch report from a newspaper. All attribute memories to the same event but originate from very different sensations of the same event.

When I say that the famine cohort remembers the famine, I do not mean that as a manifestation of collective memory. I mean that they simply can remember something that happened to them in the past, during the famine. Famine in this sense only refers to a period that includes thousands of minor events. For some this included traumatic and lifechanging episodes, for others it included minor or major inconveniences. To include all remembered under the umbrella term of collective or cultural memory, as some scholars do, is unwise for at least three reasons. First of all, it collectivises the millions of individual, subjective and personal memories into one fictional social pool. All those who died during the famine and those who lived through the period were individuals, each with their own experiences and expectations of that time.

Secondly, the language of memory combined with troublesome pasts suffered by groups has led to a tendency of diagnosing trauma to social identities. This means that the victimhood of social identities is given priority over the experience of the individual. The practical problem with this is that while individual traumas can be healed, collective traumas cannot and on the contrary are forced upon people through identity politics. If you think about it, post-traumatic stress disorders are real problems for many people. However, PTSD syndromes must be treated on an individual basis. A syndrome caused by hunger, loss of family, sickness, accidents or violence give rise to unique problems for the individual in his or her daily life. Trauma caused by bad parenting cannot be properly treated if it is mixed with a superficial notion of collective trauma inherited from previous generations. In speaking of trauma, we should not lose sight of the individual.

132

Thirdly, memory politics raises an exaggerated and misplaced moral expectation on the shoulders of historians, as if we, should or even could function as therapists for the collective. Historians are experts on uncovering the complexities and multitude of perspectives that has laid an imprint on the past. But we cannot undo the agonies of the past. For that you need either the mental capacity to forget or the moral capability to forgive. Historians are not trained to perfect these skills.

My advice if you are having problems with your mental or physical health, go and see a medical doctor. Your issues with diabetes, cardiovascular disease or obesity will not make you any healthier by having a Doctor of Philosophy telling you that it may or may not be related to your grandfather's possibly traumatic experiences, when he may have been undernourished, which may have led to a higher probability that you suffer from an unfavourable health trajectory. All of this may be interesting, but the medic can give you practical advice on how to actually improve your health through your own choices and not to be confined by the experiences of your ancestors. We can choose our identity and the stories that define us. Let us choose wisely.

Which leads me to the third corner of this holy trinity: Narratives of identity. We all have identities and more than just one, and we emphasize different identities in different situations. Proclaiming an identity is the same as to proclaim affinity or even loyalty toward in that group. Wherever and whenever someone wants to strengthen social unity, coherence and trust amongst individuals a narrative about a shared past is referenced. This is how religious identities are formed, this is how political movements take shape, this is how family heritages are visioned, this is how products and services are being marketed. This is how relationships hold together in times of adversity, by recalling the past, even the difficult past,

that united *us*. The nation-building project of Ireland and Finland from the nineteenth century onwards contain similar examples, although they carried different implications for how famine would be treated in their national narratives.

Despite all the publicity that the Irish Famine occupy in Irish historical culture nowadays, I remain convinced that governments in general prefer not to commemorate their periods of failure, something that famines are. This I base on the fact that neither the Irish nor the British educational authorities of the nineteenth century had any desire to teach a historical narrative of the Irish famine, nor were the Finnish educational authorities willing to teach the Finnish famine to any significant extent. Why would they? Why would anyone want to remember a situation where thousands of innocent children, like those of Kalle Anttonen in 1903, could not be helped? It is shameful, but for that very reason it becomes understandable why institutions would prefer to forget their blunders.



Kuvassa vasemmalta oikealle FM Henrik Forsberg, kustoksena toiminut professori Jari Eloranta ja vastaväittäjä, professori emeritus Cormac Ó Gráda. Kuva: Juha Forsberg

It is only when people can direct the blame outside of their own identities that famine can become a source of inspiration in their narrative of their past. Therefore, *who* does something is often more important than *what* is being done. In Finland, blaming the nature and night frosts has been applied to the 1860s famine, but it does not work as efficiently as blaming another government or social group. In 1918 the political division between the Socialist Reds and the bourgeois Whites reflected opposite interpretations of the 1860s famine. The constellation resulted in false expectations for each side regarding how the other should behave in a time of crisis. The White side expected the workers to

peacefully work and possibly even to die starving which is why the rebellion was such a tremendous shock to them. In 1917 the Socialist propaganda legitimized a worker rising in order to prevent starvation from occurring, which in fact did occur in the prison camps the following summer despite, or more accurately because, of the rising.

Ladies and gentlemen, in the history of famines, it is not unusual that the fear of hunger, more than hunger itself, leads to political actions that exacerbate hunger to a point where hunger is being used as a weapon to compel others into obedience. In this sense famine becomes more than just a humanitarian tragedy. It becomes a political performance where it is utilized to prove an ideological point on the essence of identities. And the battle of identities continues long after the event, both in memory and in history.

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¹ *Uuden ajan kynnyksellä: Suomen työväen albumi*, 1.1.1903 nro 6, s. 107–113. Kansalliskirjaston Digitaaliset Aineistot: <https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/aikakausi/titles/fk20090612?year=1903> (katsottu 2.3.2020).