1 Famines in Europe: An Overview

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In a memorable passage in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) Thomas Malthus claimed that 'in every State in Europe, since we have first had accounts of it, millions and millions of human existences have been repressed' by the struggle to maintain food supplies in line with population. This was his principle of population at work. Yet, he added, 'perhaps in some of these States, an absolute famine has never been known' (Malthus 1798: ch. 7). If Malthus's second claim were true, then there would be no basis for this book. But, in fact, it would be truer to say that in no country in Europe 'an absolute famine has never been known'.

It is a widely held belief among historians, economic historians and historical demographers alike that situations of severe food scarcity were quite commonplace in medieval and early modern Europe (though some countries – such as England – are usually considered to have been able to 'escape' from famine much earlier than others). Slicher van Bath (1977: 60), for example, famously argued that in pre-industrial Europe harvests were poor in one year out of four. By itself, one bad harvest was not usually enough to cause concern, never mind lead to a famine, yet quite clearly this estimate suggests that, for past European populations, severe food shortages were a recurrent, and a relatively common, phenomenon. It is somewhat surprising, then, that so little has been done until now towards establishing a comprehensive comparison of the experience of hunger and famine across different parts of the European continent. Researchers have focused instead on either limited areas (a single country at most) or on specific events, of which very few have been the object of truly wide-ranging studies. The exceptions are episodes such as the so-called Great Famine of 1315–17, the Great Winter of 1708–09, the mortality peak of the early 1740s, the 'Year without a Summer' of 1816, and the 1840s, when the potato failed.

A distinctive characteristic of this book is that it has been planned from the very beginning with a comparative perspective in mind. Each contributor has been asked to cover very large European regions, and

to attempt a reconstruction of the chronology of the main events as a key part of his or her discussion of the characteristics, the consequences and the causes of famine. The significant variability often found within each region receives due attention, but we also made a conscious attempt at making it possible to identify the truly major, supra-regional or even 'continental' famines. An overview of such famines will be provided below, as well as a brief description of the methods used to ensure the maximum possible comparability across chapters.

Before doing that, though, we should clarify a fundamental aspect: what was a famine – or, to use Malthus's definition, what was an 'absolute famine'? A few years before the publication of the *Essay on the Principle of Population*, such a fundamental protagonist of the European Enlightenment as Adam Smith distinguished between 'famine' and simple 'dearth' or scarcity of food. Only under specific circumstances did dearth develop into a famine. In fact, according to Smith famines in Europe had never arisen 'from any other cause but the violence of government attempting, by improper means, to remedy the inconveniences of dearth' (Smith 1976 [1776]: 526). As we will see, Smith's views about the causes of famine are in fact contentious – but the distinction between 'normal' dearth and 'exceptional' famine is something that has become common currency in the social sciences, though not always on the grounds of a clear definition of the two phenomena.

In this book, we focus on situations of severe food scarcity only – i.e. on famines. Throughout the chapters, we use a common definition of famine, which is also, to the best of our knowledge, the most recent one: '[F]amine refers to a shortage of food or purchasing power that leads directly to excess mortality from starvation or hunger-induced diseases' (Ó Gráda 2009: 4). We have chosen this definition, first, because it provides a clear view of what we should look for in terms of famine outcomes (famine is defined as a *killing* event) and as such considerably eases our comparative effort (see below) and, second, because it provides a synthesis of two different views on the causes of famines, which can be seen either as man-made events or as 'natural' events. This is an important topic, which for a period was highly debated and risked transforming scientific discussion into a clash between contrasting ideologies. Although we will not provide a full reconstruction of such debate here, it is important to at least recapitulate the main points.

According to Malthus, famine was 'the last, the most dreadful resource of *nature*' (Malthus 1798: ch. 7, emphasis added), and as such it contributed periodically to solve the demographic unbalance generated by the tendency of population to grow at a rate quicker than any possible improvement in the *production* of food resources. As we have seen,

however, for Smith famine in Europe was instead a man-made tragedy – a point also made, more recently and most famously, by the economist Sen. In his classic *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (1981) Sen proposes what has become known as the 'entitlements approach' to famine, which 'shifts the attention from the simple availability of food resources in a given territory to the "right" of the local population to have access to them' (Alfani 2013a: 47). According to Sen, human action can produce a situation of famine even when there is sufficient food to feed the entire population. In other words, famines result from the inefficient (or unfair) *distribution* of food, and not from a deficit in production or food availability. Sen modelled his original interpretation on the Great Bengal Famine of 1942–44, but his framework soon gained much wider currency and remains highly influential (e.g. Tilly 1983; Fogel 1992; Desai 1993). The ensuing debate saw the clash between promoters of the entitlement approach and staunch new-Malthusians. The debate also had its political side, since it called into question the behaviour of ex-colonial powers, and also pitted support for free markets against a stance more favourable to public intervention.

In this book we have tried to avoid ideological traps (at least those we were aware of). In particular, we are convinced of the fact that two common views of famine – either that they are man-made catastrophes or, instead, that they are the result of inadequate production – should not be seen as conflicting but as complementary. This is because the actual characteristics of historical famines were very varied and different causal factors seem to have prevailed in different places and epochs. Recent comparative works have suggested that, in areas such as Italy, at least the most serious famines of the early modern period were associated with a number of consecutive years of poor harvests (Alfani 2010; 2013a: 47), and more generally it has been argued that, while Smith may have misinterpreted the nature of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century famines, he would have been closer to the mark regarding those of the twentieth century (Ó Gráda 2009: 13). In addition, the regional reconstructions proposed by this book go a long way towards re-establishing inadequate production as the main (but not the only) driver of famine in the medieval and early modern period. However, they also analyse distribution: both in the sense of considering the ways in which grain markets operated and developed in time, and of showing how public institutions influenced (for the better, as it seems, more often than for the worse) the actual availability of foodstuffs to different components of the society. Generally speaking, they demonstrate that, although many famines were in fact triggered by inadequate production, the final outcomes (the actual characteristics of each famine) were *never* the pure result of 'natural' processes but were

always mediated by human agency and by institutions (private and public), which could go a long way towards making specific episodes more or less catastrophic. A brief overview of the causes of famines in different areas will be provided later. Now something more should be said about the areas we have covered, and the methods we have used to compare the timing and the intensity of famines across them.

1 Book Structure and Methodology

We have aimed to cover the whole of Europe as thoroughly as possible and practicable, with a good balance between north and south, and between west and east. The core of the book consists of nine regional chapters, all of which for the sake of simplicity refer to current political boundaries. This has some consequences also in terms of intra-region variability, as, for example, while Chapters 3 and 4 – on France and Spain, respectively – relate to countries that had unified by the sixteenth century, Chapter 2 – dedicated to Italy – covers a large number of pre-unification states that managed to stay independent until the second half of the nineteenth century, a fact that affected aspects such as famine relief and the functioning of markets within the region. Some chapters cover more than a single contemporary state. This is the case for Chapter 6, on the Low Countries (Belgium and the Netherlands); for Chapter 5, on a broad central European area that encompasses present-day Austria, Germany and Switzerland; for Chapter 9, on northern Europe, which groups together all the countries once belonging to the Kingdom of Denmark (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden); and for Chapter 10, on eastern Europe, which covers some of the countries once part of the USSR (in particular, Russia and Ukraine). Finally, the chapters on Britain and on Ireland (Chapters 7 and 8) consider the geographic boundaries of the respective islands. Figure 1.1 describes the areas covered by each chapter.

Moreover, in order to be as comprehensive as possible, we have striven to cover the whole period from the late Middle Ages to when famine ended in each area. Obviously, the ability to account properly for the Middle Ages depended greatly on the availability of earlier studies as well as of good documentation, a circumstance that places southern Europe, plus Britain and the Low Countries, in a clearly favoured position. In fact, the chapters on Italy and Britain can conduct a more or less systematic analysis of famines from c. 1250, and those on France, Spain and the Low Countries from soon thereafter (c. 1300). For other regions this can be done only from later, sometimes considerably later, periods – but all chapters try to provide at least a general picture of the earlier times, using

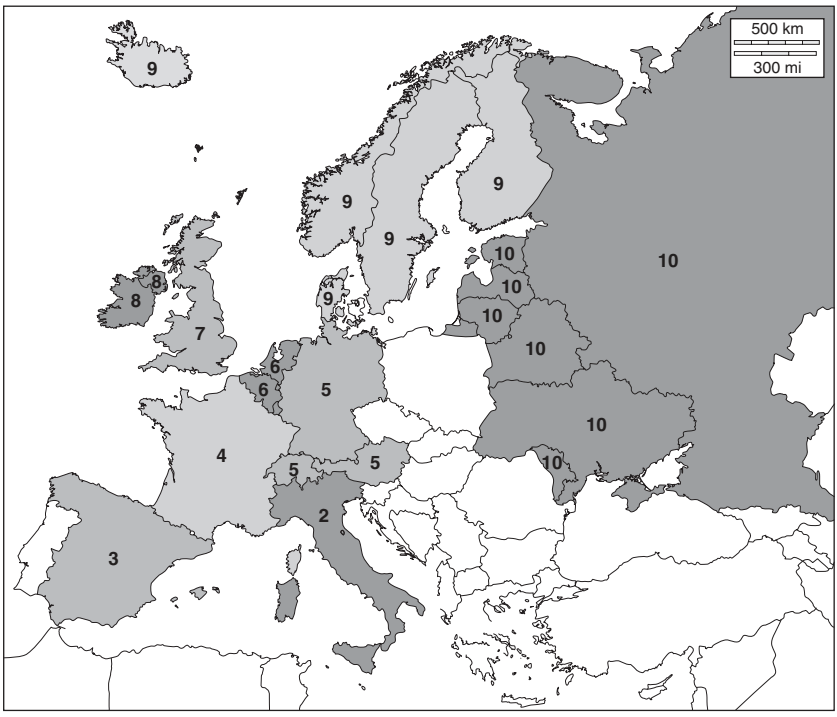

Figure 1.1 Current European states covered by the book

Note: The chapter numbers are in bold.

what information was available. In some instances, this allowed us to include very interesting episodes indeed – such as the AD 536–37 famine described in the chapter on the Nordic countries, an episode so dramatic that, according to some recent reconstructions, it had long-lasting consequences for the religious beliefs and the attitudes of survivors and their descendants, de facto fostering the beginning of the 'Viking Age'.

All regional chapters, with the exception of Chapter 10, which includes the Russian and Ukrainian famines of 1917–22, 1931–33 and 1941–47, end at some point during the nineteenth century, because during the twentieth there were no famines in Europe, apart from those induced by war. Those famines, though, had some distinctive characteristics and a cross-regional character. For these reasons, we decided to add an additional chapter that focuses specifically on famines occurring during World Wars I and II or in their immediate wake – which, for the vast majority of the European population, were the last episodes of extreme and lethal food scarcity.

As already mentioned, we have tried to ensure the maximum possible comparability of each chapter. To this end, not only did we use Ó Gráda's definition of famine as the common standard, but that very definition also gave us an indication of which variable we should invoke in order to distinguish famines from simple episodes of dearth, as well as to measure famine intensity: increases in mortality, caused by either starvation or hunger-induced diseases (note that in most instances it is very difficult, if not altogether impossible, to distinguish between the two). In this book, famines are killing events, and, although we are aware of the fact that famines also had a marked impact on many other aspects of human life, we are not considering systematically demographic crises that did not cause a significant increase in deaths (though some chapters partly integrate these in the general analysis: see, for example, Chapter 4, on France). This is why, in all chapters and whenever possible, we relied on time series of deaths or burials as fundamental sources for reconstructing the timing and severity of famines. We also defined a common methodology to be applied to all regional reconstructions relying on time series of deaths/burials, which is described in detail in Chapter 2, on Italy.

The second kind of information, which features heavily in many chapters, is time series of prices of wheat and other foodstuffs. These have always been a common basis for the study of famines across Europe – they were the cornerstone of the French *histoire sérielle* and of the notion of 'subsistence crises' introduced by Labrousse (1944) and refined by Meuvret (1946), and they have since featured, at least to some degree, in all or almost all accounts of famine; see, for example, the seminal work on central Europe by Abel (1974), or the very recent book by Ó Gráda (2015a). Some additional information about the importance of the French Annales historical school in the early developments of modern famine historiography is provided in Chapter 4. Time series of prices have the double advantage of often being available before series on deaths/burials, and of allowing the historian to take account of larger sub-regional areas ('markets') than the parish or community level at which burials were usually recorded. On the other hand, they do not allow, either in principle or in practice, the detailed coverage of the territory that time series of burials make possible, and, secondly, they do not give a direct indication of our marker of real famines: mortality increase. The sensitivity of excess mortality to increases in the price of cereals varied considerably over time and across space (Weir 1984; Solar 2007; Kelly and Ó Gráda 2014b). As a consequence, we combined information on prices with that on deaths/burials whenever possible, and in general this book is less reliant upon inferences based on price data than is often the case. As for the use of time series of burials, we applied insofar as

possible a similar methodology across chapters, focusing on as simple an indicator as the evaluation of how many times the peak prices increased over the pre-crisis level, sometimes coupled with more refined techniques such as the analysis of the residuals of Hodrick–Prescott filters (see Chapters 2 and 9).

Sometimes neither time series of deaths/burials nor grain prices were available. This was usually the case for the earlier periods covered by each chapter. In this situation, we based our reconstructions on comparisons of the findings in published case studies (as many as available) produced by specialists in the history of famines or of food provisioning – something we will refer to as the 'expert method'. If and when we found universal or at least very broad agreement that a specific famine occurred in case studies related to different areas/communities, we made a reasonable hypothesis that the event fitted our definition and included it in the regional reconstructions. Vice versa, we tended to reject episodes on which distinct case studies disagreed.

Taken together, this eclectic combination of information and methodology was used to reconstruct a chronology of the famines affecting each area. In some instances, these were very wide, and even pan-European events – as discussed in the overview that follows.

2 The Main European Famines, c. 1250 to the Present

The distinctive history of famines in Europe owes much to European economic exceptionalism. At the beginning of the period covered in this book, Europe may already have had an edge on the rest of the world in terms of economic development, though some might claim that the most developed regions of China or the Islamic world at the time were more developed (Pomeranz 2005; Goody 2006). The hard data required to corroborate such claims are lacking. By c. 1800, however, thanks to the much-debated 'great divergence', living standards in Europe were already considerably higher than anywhere else apart from the European 'outpost' of North America. By c. 1800, too, the economies of north-western Europe had forged ahead of those of southern and eastern Europe (Broadberry and Gupta 2006; Clark 2007; Allen et al. 2011). By then Europe was the most commercialised, urbanised and industrialised part of the globe. The living standards of the masses in most places, while pitiful by our standards, were considerably above barebones subsistence. This increased their power to resist famine. Broadly speaking, rising incomes were accompanied by reduced vulnerability to famine, and, as the chapters that follow make plain, the most developed parts of the continent (i.e. the Netherlands and England) were the first to become famine-free, or almost so.

The research conducted by the authors of this book on different parts of the continent allows us to propose the first truly comparative chronology of European famines in the historical long run, as well as to provide, if not an absolute ranking of the different episodes in terms of severity (a task that would probably be doomed to fail, given the heterogeneity of the information currently available for different areas and periods), at least some indication about which the worst famines of all were, as well as which famines seem to have been somewhat overrated by earlier historiography. To this end, a synopsis is provided in Table 1.1, in which we list only the famines reported by at least two regional chapters.

To some degree, the reporting of famines for a specific area reflects the local availability of primary and secondary sources. In particular, the apparent scarcity of famines in eastern Europe does not reflect a condition of better food security but the relative scarcity of information usable for this area. As a consequence, the significance of this comparative synopsis can be fully understood only if it is coupled with the detailed reconstructions proposed by each regional chapter.

However, the comparative information we collected allows us to identify quite clearly some general trends. First of all, regarding the occurrence and the intensity of famines over time, we find a clustering of fairly severe events in the half-century or so preceding the Black Death epidemic of 1347–51. This is consistent with the view that demographic pressures were placing a non-negligible stress on the European population before the Black Death – especially, as it seems from the reporting of particularly frequent famines, in the south of the continent. On the other hand, the worst famine of the period, in 1315–17, affected central and northern Europe more severely, and, although Spain did not escape, Italy did.

The Black Death, which, according to the most recent estimates may have killed up to three-fifths of Europe's population (Benedictow 2004), was followed by a century and a half when large-scale famines were relatively few in Europe. This point is corroborated by some of the regional chapters, such as those on Italy, on Britain and on Nordic Europe. There seems to have been only one major famine in the fifteenth century (that of 1437–38, affecting central European countries as well as Britain), and, although we find some signals that the situation was changing in the first part of the sixteenth century, it is only from about 1550 on that the frequency of famines begins to increase very quickly – culminating with the terrible famines of the 1590s.

It is the seventeenth century, though, that clearly stands out as the period during which food security across the continent became a truly

Table 1.1 *Famines in Europe, 1250–1900*

Europe	Italy	Spain	France	Germany, Switzerland, Austria	Low Countries	Britain
1256–58	1256–58	1255–62				1256–58
1302–03	1302–03	1299–1304				
1315–17		1313–17	1315–17	1315–18	1315–17	1315–17
1328–30	1328–30	1327–28				
1339–40	1339–40	1339–41				
1346–47	1346–47	1346–48	1347			
1374–75	1374–75	1374–76				
1437–38			1438	1437–40	1437–38	1437–38
1521–23					1521–22	
1530	1527–30			1530–31		
1556–57		1557			1556–57	1555–57
1569–74	1569–72		1573	1569–74	1572–73	
1585–87	1586–87		1585–87		1585–87	1585–87
1590–98	1590–93	1591–95	1593, 1598	1594–98		1594–98
1600–03	1600–01					
1620–23	1618–22			1620–23		1622–23
1625–31	1628–29	1630–31		1625–30	1625–26	1629–31
1647–52	1648–49	1647–52		1651–52	1648–52	
1659–62		1659–62	1661		1661–62	

Table 1.1 (*cont.*)

Europe	Italy	Spain	France	Germany, Switzerland, Austria	Low Countries	Britain
1675–76			1676		1674–76	
1678–79	1678–79	1678–85				
1693–97	1693–95	1694–95	1693–94	1691–95	1692–94	
1698–1700		1699		1698–1701	1698–99	
1708–11	1708–09	1709–11	1709–10	1709–12	1708–10	
1719			1719			
1728–30						1727–30
1740–43	1743–45	1741–42		1739–41	1740–41	1741–42
1763–65	1764–67	1763–65				
1771–72				1770–72		
1787–89			1788–89	1787–90		
1794–95				1793–95	1794–95	
1803–05		1803–04		1805		
1816–17	1817			1815–17	1816–17	
1845–50				1845–48	1845–50	
1866–68						

Notes: In the first column ('Europe'), famine duration has been derived by retaining only years fo
regions. In the other columns, duration has been evaluated on the basis of the evidence available
additional details). In the first column, the major European famines of the entire period are mark