

Historic Famines

The following is a table of ‘Great Famines’, defined as those with an estimated death toll of 100,000 or more, between 1870 and 2024, along with a small number of well-known famines with a lower death toll. The list is regularly updated as new research is included.

Note: Mortality estimates marked * are minimum numbers, ongoing crises, or cases under ongoing active investigation. Mortality figures in brackets do not meet the threshold of 100,000 deaths. There are many additional famines of a scale lower than this threshold not included in the list.

Table of Historic Famines, 1870-2024

Date	Location	Excess deaths	Causes
“Late Victorian Holocausts” and other famines in colonial India 1870-1914			
1876-78	India (Madras, southern India, Bombay)	6,100,000	Droughts, background of colonial dispossession/exploitation, relief failure
1888-89	India (north Bihar)	250,000	
1896-97	India (Madras, Bombay Deccan, Bengal, Central provinces)	5,500,000	El-Niño droughts, background of colonial dispossession/exploitation, inadequacies of ‘famine codes’
1899-1901	India (Bombay, Central Provinces)	1,000,00	
Famines in China 1870-1912			
1876-79	China (Shanzi, Henah, Shandong, Zhili)	9,400,000	Drought, weakness of government, legacy of war and colonial disruption
1897-1901	China (north)	1,000,000	El-Niño drought, weakness of government
Famines, mass starvation and catastrophes in the “Scramble for Africa” and its aftermath			
1888-92	Sudan (<i>Sanat Sita</i>)	1,500,000	War, pillage & requisitioning, forced displacement by Mahdist state in context of colonialism
1888-92	Ethiopia (<i>Qifu Ken</i>)	1,500,000	Epizootic rinderpest, war, pillage and requisitions,
1896-1900	East Africa	100,000+	Drought and rinderpest In the context of British and German colonial conquest
1899-1902	South Africa (Boer War)	(75,000)	British scorched earth and concentration camps
1899-1905	Congo Free State	1,300,000	Belgian policy of forced labor, forced displacement
1904	German South West Africa	(80,000)	Genocide of the Herero and Nama
1905-07	Tanganyika (Mau Mau)	300,000	German policy of scorched earth, forced displacement, possible genocide
1910-13	Somali peninsula	100,000+	British ‘pacification’ and lawlessness of colonial conquest, pillage
1913-14	West African Sahel	800,000	Drought, incapacity of colonial state to provide relief

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1913-14	Sudan	100,000+	Drought, incapacity of colonial state to provide relief
Other famines 1870-1915			
1870-12	Persia (Iran)	500,000	Triggered by drought, in the context of colonial disruption
1876-19	Brazil (northeast)	500,000	Drought, neo-colonial exploitation
Mass starvation of the Armenians and other minorities in the Ottoman Empire			
1894-16	Armenians	100,000+	'Hamidian' attacks on Armenians; forced displacement
1912-23	Greeks and Assyrians	200,000	Forced relocation by Ottoman government, wartime controls
1915-16	Armenians	400,000	Genocide, forced starvation, forced marches
1919	Armenia	200,000	Legacy of war, forced displacement, state weakness
Famines associated with American empire			
1895-98	Cuba (US-Spanish war)	155,000	Counterinsurgency, scorched earth, concentration camps
1899-1902	Philippines	775,000	Counterinsurgency, scorched earth
Mass starvation associated with World War One			
1914-16	German East Africa	300,000	War, pillage, scorched earth
1914-18	Serbia and the Balkans	1,000,000	War, forced displacement, internment
1915-18	Austria-Hungary (Galicia)	465,000	War, requisitions, Russian occupation
1915-18	Greater Syria	500,000	War, blockade
1917-19	Germany	763,000	Blockade
1917-19	Persia	455,200	War, requisitions, occupation, economic crisis
Russian and Soviet famines 1890-1933			
1891-95	Russia	1,300,000	Drought, economic crisis, epidemics
1918-20	USSR (northern Russia)	4,000,000	Economic crisis, failure of markets, war
1921-22	USSR (southern Russia & Ukraine)	5,200,000	Civil war, procurement, drought, epidemics
1931-33	USSR (Southern Russia)	1,500,000	Government policy: food requisitions and collectivization
	USSR (Ukraine, Holodomor)	3,000,000	Initially: food requisitions and collectivization; later: targeted starvation, genocide (disputed)
	USSR (Kazakhstan)	1,500,000	Government policy: food requisitions and collectivization/sedenterization, possibly genocide
Famines in China in the warlord era			
1920-21	China (Henan, Shanxi, Shandong and Zhili)	500,000	Drought, conflict, weakness of government
1928-30	China (Gansu, Shanxi, Henan, Shandong and Zhili)	10,000,000	Drought, locusts, conflict, displacement and collapse in government capacity due to war
Famines and mass starvation in Asia associated with World War Two			
1934-37	China (Sichuan)	5,000,000	Drought, war, displacement and requisitions

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1937-45	China (Henan, Hebei, Shandong)	5,000,000	Chinese nationalists' destruction of dams, floods, Japanese requisitions, mass displacement
1941-45	Starvation of Japanese soldiers	1,400,000	Failure of rationing, destruction of infrastructure, exhaustion of local food supplies
1942-45	Indonesia (Java)	2,400,000	Japanese occupation, requisitioning
1942-44	India (Bengal)	3,000,000	British war policy of requisitioning, economic extraction, floods (typhoon), relief failure
1944-45	Vietnam	1,000,000	Floods (typhoon), French economic policy, requisitions, disruption of war
Germany's Hungerplan (genocide)			
1939-45	Poland (Polish civilians)	500,000	Forced labor, requisitions, low rations
1939-45	Poland (Jews)	1,000,000	Starvation in ghettos and concentration/extermination camps, genocide
1941-44	Soviet PoWs	3,300,000	Forced starvation in POW camps, slave labor
	Siege of Leningrad	1,000,000	Siege
	Ukraine, western Russia & Belarus	4,100,000	Forced requisition, forced displacement, scorched earth, slave labor, genocide
Other famines and starvation in Europe during and after World War Two			
1939-42	Spain	200,000	Francoist autarky, Allied blockade, legacy of the civil war
1939-45	USSR (deportations of ethnic minorities)	560,000	Forced displacement, genocide
1941-45	USSR (hunger in general population)	540,000	Food shortages, displacement, forced labor
1941-47	USSR (German PoWs during & after WW II)	1,100,000	Forced labor, extreme food rationing
1941-44	Greece	300,000	German requisitions, destruction, Allied blockade
1944-45	Netherlands 'Hunger Winter'	(23,000)	German flooding, Allied blockade
1945-47	Eastern Europe (displaced & stateless persons)	250,000	Forced displacement/ethnic cleansing, lack of relief
1946-47	USSR (Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus)	1,100,000	Requisitioning, drought, impact of war
Post-War Communist Famines in Asia			
1958-62	China (nationwide)	36,000,000	'Great Leap Forward': Government policy: collectivization and requisitions; response/relief failure
1975	China (Henan)	230,000	Floods, failure of relief
1975-79	Cambodia	1,210,000	Khmer Rouge policies: collectivization, enforced starvation, extermination
1995-97	North Korea	330,000	Floods, drought, failed economic policies

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Other 1970s Famines in Asia			
1974	Bangladesh	1,500,000	Floods, legacy of civil war, US cut off in food aid
1975-79	East Timor	103,000	Indonesian counterinsurgency
Post-colonial Famines in Africa			
1958	Ethiopia (Tigray)	100,000	Drought, relief failure, chronic vulnerability to famine
1968-70	Nigeria (Biafra)	1,300,000	Blockade, war, mass displacement
1969-74	Sahel (Mauritania, Mali, Niger nomadic population)	101,000	Drought, economic marginalization
1973-74	Ethiopia (Wollo, Ogaden)	200,000	Drought, feudalism, chronic vulnerability to famine, relief failure
1980	Uganda (Karamoja)	(35,000)	State failure, pillage of livestock
1981-85	Mozambique	300,000	Counterinsurgency, rebel pillage, drought
1983-85	Ethiopia (Tigray, Wollo, southern & eastern areas)	800,000	Drought, counterinsurgency (north), economic policies (southern and eastern areas), forced resettlement, relief failure
1984-85	Sudan (Darfur, Kordofan, Red Sea)	240,000	Drought, failed economic policies, relief failure
2002	Malawi	(3,000)	Drought, relief failure
2005	Niger	(40,000)	Drought, relief failure
Complex humanitarian emergencies and war famines in Africa and the Middle East			
1987-88	Sudan (south and IDPs)	250,000	War: scorched earth, pillage, forced displacement, siege, relief failure
1991-93	Somalia	240,000	War: scorched earth, forced displacement, pillage
1992-94	Sudan (Nuba Mountains, Upper Nile)	225,000	War: scorched earth, forced displacement, pillage, siege, relief failure, genocide (against Nuba)
1998-89	Sudan (Bahr al Ghazal)	(70,000)	War: scorched earth, forced displacement, pillage
1998-2007	Democratic Republic of Congo (eastern)	290,000*	War, forced displacement, state collapse, pillage
2003-05	Sudan (Darfur)	200,000	Counterinsurgency forced displacement, genocide (disputed)
2003-06	Uganda (Acholi areas)	100,000	Counterinsurgency, pillage
2011-12	Somalia (south-central)	258,000	Drought, war, economic crisis, relief failure
2012-23	Syria	268,000*	War, siege, destruction of essential infrastructure
2014-18	South Sudan	193,000*	War: scorched earth, forced displacement, pillage
2016-19	Nigeria (Boko Haram war)	340,000	Counterinsurgency, siege, requisitioning
2016-21	Yemen	223,000*	Blockade, war, mass displacement, economic crisis
2020-23	Central African Republic	553,000*	War, state failure
2021-23	Ethiopia (Tigray)	336,000*	Forced starvation, siege, destruction of essential infrastructure, pillage
2023-24*	Sudan	100,000*+	War, pillage, destruction of infrastructure, mass displacement, relief failure