World Peace Foundation

Forensic Architecture

Towards a Social Theory of Genocidal Starvation

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August 2025

Overview

1. This paper develops a sociological theory of genocidal starvation, including how the provision of rations, an ostensibly humanitarian act, can be an element in an operation intended to destroy a society.

2. The words 'company' and 'companion' originate from the Latin *companio*, which combines *com* (with) and *panis* (bread). Sharing food is foundational to the family, community and society. Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions center on breaking bread together. We could consider a definition of mass starvation as when people fight for bread instead of sharing it.

3. As an individual, biological phenomenon, starvation occurs when a person suffers extreme malnutrition to the point of risk of death. This is important but incomplete. Starvation is a *social* phenomenon also. The outcome of mass starvation may be the inability of the targeted community to exist *as a community*. Historical and anthropological evidence from famine indicates that this social phenomenon is no less significant than mass death and in some respects may be more so.

4. The verb 'to starve' is also transitive. It is something that one person does to another, or an authority does to a collectivity. Insofar as the objective of the perpetrator of starvation is damaging or destroying a group as such, this opens a perspective to consider mass starvation as a specifically genocidal crime.

5. 'Famine' is not a legal term. It does not have a universally agreed meaning in the English language, let alone in others, although the United Nations has adopted a standardized usage based upon the Integrated food security Phase Classification (IPC) methods and metrics, with the purpose of forecasting and thereby preventing its occurrence.[1] Insofar as famine has been characterized as a crime, this has been done by

[1] IPC, 'What is Famine?' https://www.ipcinfo.org/famine-facts/

political scientists and sociologists, providing evidence and perspectives that can inform legal debates without claiming special legal expertise.[2]

6. Over centuries, famine and starvation have often been tools of genocide and extermination, alongside other means of mass murder and forced displacement.[3] The still under-examined *Hungerplan* of the Nazis, accompanying Operation Barbarossa on the Eastern Front of World War Two, entangled with the Holocaust of European Jews, is the paradigmatic case of a plan of very large-scale planned extermination of subject peoples using starvation unto death. The Soviet Union's Holodomor in Ukraine is another instance, that holds special significance, not least because it was the topic of an influential lecture by Raphael Lemkin.[4] The genocide of the Herero and Nama by the German colonial authorities in South-West Africa (today's Namibia) in 1904 was accomplished through driving them into the desert and denying them food and water. Many of the victims of the Armenian genocide perished through hunger, thirst and exposure. Starvation was the principal means used for population control and extermination by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.[5]

7. This paper focuses on three particular issues.

8. The first is the specific role played by starvation in destroying *a group*, as such, as opposed to causing many or most of its group members to perish. Excess deaths are a commonly used index for the gravity of famine.[6] There are obvious reasons why this is so. But mortality from hunger and related causes is not the only dimension of famine and mass starvation. The key point here is that mass starvation is an efficient way of causing irreparable harm to a target *group*. That can be done by various means, such as separating members of the group from their homes and land, or from one another, or by inflicting on them sufficient social and psychological trauma that the same outcome is achieved.

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[2] De Waal, Alex, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the disaster relief industry in Africa*, London, James Currey, 1997; Edkins, Jenny, 'The Criminalization of Mass Starvation: From natural disaster to crime against humanity,' in Stephen Devereux (ed.) *The New Famines: Why famines persist in an age of globalization*, Routledge, 2007, pp. 50-65; The most ambitious attempt to formulate famine as an international crime, by David Marcus, had more uptake among scholars of comparative politics than among lawyers: Marcus, David. "Famine crimes in international law." *American Journal of International Law* 97, no. 2 (2003): 245-281; de Waal, Alex, *Mass Starvation: The history and future of famine*, Polity, 2017.

[3] Conley, Bridget, and Alex de Waal. 'Genocide, Starvation and Famine.' In: Ben Kiernan, (ed). *The Cambridge World History of Genocide, Vol. I*. Cambridge University Press; 2023, pp. 127-149.

[4] Lemkin, Raphael, 'Soviet Genocide in Ukraine,' in Serbyn, Roman, 'Lemkin on the Ukrainian Genocide,' *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 7, (2009) 123-130. (Original lecture, 1953.)

[5] DeFalco, Randle C. "Accounting for famine at the extraordinary chambers in the courts of Cambodia: The crimes against humanity of extermination, inhumane acts and persecution." *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 5, no. 1 (2011): 142-158.

[6] Howe, Paul, and Stephen Devereux. "Famine intensity and magnitude scales: a proposal for an instrumental definition of famine." *Disasters* 28, no. 4 (2004): 353-372; World Peace Foundation, 'Historic Famines,' 2025, https://worldpeacefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Historic-Famines-synthesis-table-191224.pdf

9. The second issue is how humanitarian actors have engaged with the dilemmas that arise in situations of armed conflict where access to people in need requires cooperation from the belligerents. Of particular concern is counter-insurgency (COIN). Over the last forty years, especially, humanitarian theorists and practitioners have debated how they should operate in war zones, but the theorization of COIN humanitarianism as a specific condition has lagged. Principles and law have been established to limit the misuse of relief aid in pursuit of war goals, but the integration of ration provisions within COIN requires special attention. This is particularly salient because the overall purpose of COIN can be to erase the political agency of the group or nation that is resisting the governing authorities, which may overlap with destroying that group as an ethnic or national entity.

10. The third issue is how to understand famine early warning and prevention, and how this relates to preventing genocide. The effects of starvation unfold over months, and humanitarian information is available during that period, giving an opportunity to prevent a genocidal act unfolding to its outcome. Humanitarian information systems are limited by data access and limitations on analysis. They struggle to position their data on humanitarian outcomes within political and military scenarios. Their purpose, which is to prevent mass starvation and famine, is consistent with the duty to prevent genocide, and they provide essential information to efforts to achieve this goal.

(I) Starvation and the Destruction of Groups *as Such*

11. The societal aspect of starvation is central, not incidental. This makes it particularly relevant to the crime of genocide. In his 1944 book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*,[7] Raphael Lemkin put forward his first definition of genocide. He did so in political-sociological terms.

> Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups.[8]

12. Lemkin squarely placed genocide within the history of colonial conquest and subjugation.

13. A few pages later, Lemkin devotes attention to the German use of rations and starvation during World War Two, which was raging at the time. His documentation was, for obvious reasons, incomplete and the section is thinly documented. It is also under-theorized. He reproduces tables of rations allocated to different racial groups under Nazi

[7] Lemkin, Raphael, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of occupation, analysis of government, proposals for redress*, Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment, 1944.
[8] Lemkin, 1944, p. 79.

occupation, with the Jews provided with the least by far. He observes that for the victims, 'a daily fight literally for bread and for physical survival may handicap thinking in both general and national terms.'[9]

14. It was in a 1953 lecture on the Soviet Union's Holodomor in Ukraine that Lemkin took his analysis a step further.

> The [Ukrainian] nation is too populous to be exterminated completely with any efficiency. However, its leadership, religious, intellectual, political, its select and determining parts are quite small and therefore easily eliminated, and so it is upon these groups particularly that the full force of the Soviet axe has fallen, with its familiar tools of mass murder, deportation and forced labor, exile and starvation.[10]

15. Having discussed the assault on the intellectuals and the clergy, the 'brain' and 'soul' of the nation, Lemkin turns to the attack on peasants:

> The third prong of the Soviet plan was aimed at the farmers, the large mass of independent peasants who are the repository of the tradition, folklore and music, the national language and literature, the national spirit, of Ukraine. The weapon used against this body is perhaps the most terrible of all—starvation.[11]

16. We should note in passing another observation from Lemkin's lecture: 'The mass, indiscriminate murders have not, however, been lacking—they have simply not been integral parts of the plan, but only chance variations.'[12]

17. Lemkin invented the term 'genocide' and was the inspiration and the energy behind the Genocide Convention. The focus of this annexure is on sociology rather than the law, but the empirics of starvation as a social phenomenon are relevant to interpreting the law, including the duty of preventing genocidal starvation.

18. Mass starvation has historically been experienced as a social phenomenon. In some cases, among those affected, famine may be defined as a threat to a *way of life*.[13] As people become hungry, they are compelled to sell or abandon their land and homes, the objects that made possible their livelihoods, and their most treasured possessions. They become selfish, violating social norms, and engaging in undignified activities such as scavenging, begging, eating prohibited foods, and other means of finding money or food that will tarnish their standing in the community. Stories told by famine survivors involve making unbearable choices, such as leaving behind elderly people who are unable to walk, choosing to buy medicine for one child but not another, turning away hungry nieces and

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[9] Lemkin, 1944, p. 85.
[10] Lemkin, 2009, p. 127
[11] Lemkin, 2009, p. 128.
[12] Lemkin, 2009, p. 129.
[13] De Waal, Alex, *Famine that Kills: Darfur, Sudan, 1984-1985*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989.

nephews from the door, or turning a blind eye while a sister or daughter sells her body. It is the trauma and shame associated with these memories that have made public memorialization of famine so problematic, often long-delayed or not even attempted at all.[14] Perhaps the most common phenomena are abandonment of land and the poorest or most vulnerable members of the community being reduced to long-term destitution, losing their livelihoods.

19. Famines may result in the physical separation of a group from its land or the separation of members from one another. The most substantial demographic impact of many historic famines is not mortality but migration. In the case of the Great Hunger in Ireland, this took the form of mass emigration to North America, the British mainland and elsewhere, as well as abandonment of the peasant settlements of the west of Ireland with people moving to towns.[15] In Indian famines of the 19th century, it was internal migration,[16] notwithstanding the British policies of seeking to limit urbanization. In Darfur, Sudan, during 2003-05, the overall demographic impact of humanitarian emergency was accelerated, traumatic urbanization, with former villagers living in camps for internally displaced persons that gradually became permanent urban centres.[17]

20. In colonial contexts, ruling authorities were usually anxious to control migration, and the principal function of immiseration was to force people into the wage labour economy. The Indian political scientist Amrita Rangasami identified famine as a designed failure of social reproduction, a process of expropriation of assets and/or loss of the ability to own one's own labor or one's own body: 'Famine can be considered a socio-economic process during which starvation is imposed and accelerated. Its duration has to be mapped in relation to the objective of the beneficiary.'[18] Starvation was, she argued, the imposition of the colonial or post-colonial pattern of property and labor relations. Similar analyses have been developed for colonial and early post-colonial Nigeria[19] and Sudan,[20]

[14] Orjuela, Camilla, 'Remembering/Forgetting Hunger: Towards an understanding of famine memorialisation.' *Third World Quarterly* 45.2, (2024) 259-276.
[15] Crowley, John, William J. Smyth, & Mike Murphy (eds.), *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, Cork University Press, 2012.
[16] Dyson, Tim. *India's Historical Demography: Studies in Famine, Disease and Society*. Routledge, 1989.
[17] De Waal, Alex. "Why Humanitarian Organizations Need to Tackle Land Issues." In Sara Pantuliano (ed.) *Uncharted Territory: Land, conflict and humanitarian action*, London, ODI, 2009, pp. 9-26.
[18] Rangasami, Amrita. 'The Study of Starvation and Famine: Some problems.' In Gendreau, F., C. Meillassoux, B. Schlemmer & M. Verlet (eds.) Les spectres de Malthus: déséquilibres alimentaires, déséquilibres démographiques. Paris: Études et Documentation Internationales, 1991, pp. 41-60, at p. 46
[19] Watts, Michael. *Silent Violence: Food, famine, and peasantry in northern Nigeria*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.
[20] Duffield, Mark. *Global Governance and the New Wars: The merging of development and security*. London: Zed, 2001.

French colonial Africa and Indochina,[21] and in a Communist context, for the famines of the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union.[22]

21. The social and psychological damage to a group during famine is also pervasive. Elements of these harms are incorporated within the acute food insecurity indicators measured by humanitarian data systems (discussed in Section III below). Taken together, these can be considered as a harm comparable to how the historian and social theorist Orlando Patterson has characterized slavery as 'social death'.[23] In Patterson's framing, the powerlessness of enslavement has three key characteristics: (i) the condition of slavery originates as a substitute for physical death; (ii) the slave is subject to natal alienation, losing rights associated with kinship and lineage, including a community of memory; and (iii) the slave has forfeited honour. The parallels with the social harms of mass starvation are inexact but resonant. For the communities and families most affected by starvation, the loss of autonomy, inclusion in community and honour, are profound and long-lasting.

22. Under conditions of famine, it is astonishing how much hunger people are prepared to endure before they transgress basic social norms. Parents will starve themselves to conserve food for their children. For some, the humiliations of starvation are literally a fate worse than death, and they will die before they resort to scavenging or stealing or eating forbidden foods. However, starvation also causes psychological disorder, described in older literatures as 'psycho-social disintegration.'[24] The obsession with food and the biological imperative of survival can override deep social rules. The Russian sociologist Pitrim Sorokin, who experienced famine in the 1920s, memorably observed, 'to hunger, nothing is sacred,' and recounts cases in which people deceive and steal from even their closest family members, and of cannibalism. Describing how religious duties are abandoned, the dead are buried without funeral rites, and forbidden foods are eaten, he wrote:

> hunger makes a norm of abnormality and the sacrilege becomes a tolerable and admissible act. Since this 'sacrilege' would prevent satisfaction of hunger, starvation mercilessly rips off the 'social' garments from man and shows him as a naked animal, on the naked earth.[25]

23. Similar themes are described in historical studies of famine and some anthropological studies from an earlier generation of ethnographers. An anthropologist

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[21] Slobodkin, Yan. *The Starving Empire: A history of famine in France's colonies*. Cornell University Press, 2023.
[22] Graziosi, Andrea, and Frank Sysyn, 'Communism and Hunger: Introduction.' *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, *3*(2), 2016, pp. 5-10.
[23] Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A comparative study, with a new preface*. Harvard University Press, 1982.
[24] Jelliffe, Derrick B., & E.F. Patrice Jelliffe, 'The Effects of Starvation on the Function of the Family and of Society,' in Blix, G., Y. Hofvander, and B. Vahlquist. (eds.) *Famine. A symposium dealing with nutrition and relief operations in times of disaster*. Stockholm: Swedish Nutrition Foundation (1971), pp. 54-63.
[25] Sorokin, Pitrim, 1975. *Hunger as a Factor in Human Affairs*, (originally published 1922), Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, pp. 148 and 137.

who witnessed social breakdown associated with starvation is Colin Turnbull, whose ethnography of the Ik of Uganda, *The Mountain People*, caused a furore.[26] Many of his colleagues did not want to accept what he had disturbingly documented.

24. In Ireland, the great hunger of 1845-52 is represented in collective memory as a time of when community ended and the land was emptied.[27] A historian who has candidly confronted the breakdown in social norms and the violation of taboos in that famine and elsewhere is the leading historian of famine Cormac Ó Gráda.[28] In several instances he has documented the unspeakable, including the starving selling their own children, and the final taboo of consuming human flesh. In Bengal, nationwide famine is defined as 'when the epoch changes.'[29] The historian Janam Mukherjee describes how, during and after the Bengal famine of 1943, people were stripped of their dignity and reduced to their bare bodies.[30] He argues that this normalised indifference to human life normal and contributed to the intercommunal violence that tore the region apart just a few years later. In Malawi, the famine of 1948 was recalled, decades later, as the year when the menfolk abandoned their families.[31] In Sudan, the 1913 famine was named *Julu*, meaning 'wandering', and famines in general are understood primarily as a threat to a *way of life*, rather than to individual lives as such.[32] Among the Ghanaian Akamba, famines are generically labelled *Ngambu*, a word that signifies 'grabbing', 'trespassing' or 'squeezing,' with particular reference to loss of land and pawning children.[33] In the siege of Leningrad, the term 'nutritional dystrophy' came to refer not only to biological starvation, but also 'dystrophic indifference to the life and death of one's family and friends' that destroyed the person 'much earlier than death.'[34] In her fictionalized memoir of the siege, *Notes from the Blockade*, Lidiya Ginzburg wrote, 'Dystrophy, the emaciated pharaonic cow, devoured everything—friendship, ideology, cleanliness, shame, the intelligentsia habit of not stealing

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[26] Turnbull, C., *The Mountain People*, Simon & Schuster 1972; Wilson, P.J., McCall, G., Geddes, W.R., Mark, A.K., Pfeiffer, J.E., Boskey, J.B. and Turnbull, C.M., 'More Thoughts on the Ik and Anthropology [and Reply].' *Current Anthropology*, *16*(3), (1975) 343-358; Dirks, R, G. J. Armelagos, C.A. Bishop, I.A. Brady, T. Brun, J. Copans, V. S. Doherty, *et al*. 'Social responses during severe food shortages and famine [and comments and reply].' *Current Anthropology* 21.1 (1980): 21-44.

[27] Mac Suibhne, B., 2017. *The End of Outrage: Post-Famine adjustment in rural Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[28] Ó Gráda, Cormac., *Famine: A short history*. Princeton University Press, 2010; Ó Gráda, C., *Eating People Is Wrong, and other essays on famine, its past, and its future*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

[29] Currey, B. 1978. 'The Famine Syndrome: Its definition for relief and rehabilitation in Bangladesh'. *Ecology of Food and Nutrition*, *7*(2), 87-97 at p. 87.

[30] Mukherjee, Janam. *Hungry Bengal: War, famine and the end of empire*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

[31] Vaughan, M., 1987. *The Story of an African Famine: Gender and famine in Twentieth-Century Malawi*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, at pp. 119ff.

[32] De Waal, A., 1989. *Famine that Kills: Darfur, Sudan*, 1984-1985, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. 71-77.

[33] Jackson, K.A., 1976. 'The Family Entity and Famine among the Nineteenth-Century Akamba of Kenya: Social responses to environmental stress.' *Journal of Family History*, *1*(2), pp.193-216, at pp. 199-200.

[34] Manley, R., 2015. 'Nutritional Dystrophy: The science and semantics of starvation in World War II." In Schechter, B. R. Manley & A. Peri. (eds) *Hunger and War: Food Provisioning in the Soviet Union during World War II*. Indiana University Press, p. 239.

whatever is lying about. But more than everything love. Love disappeared from the city, much like sugar or matches.'[35]

25. Common to all these folk conceptualizations of famine is that it is a time when the social fabric is torn, when social taboos are violated, and when people did literally unspeakable things to one another in order to survive. 'Hunger' is both a biological experience and a metonym for the ultimate societal catastrophe.

26. Tom Dannenbaum revealingly compares siege starvation to 'societal torture':[36]

> Siege starvation is not merely an anomalously slow mechanism by which harm or death is inflicted in war. … [I]t is better understood as a process by which biological imperatives are turned against fundamental human capabilities in a manner more normatively reminiscent of torture than it is of a kinetic attack….
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> The first dimension of the distortion of mass starvation is fundamentally political and more closely resembles the purposeful weaponization of the body in torture. It is on this dimension that a besieging force deprives the population of essentials with the purpose of breaking its will to resist. The second dimension is social. It manifests in the foreseeable effect of starvation conditions in undermining our capacities for the kind of commitments and bonds that underpin community, friendship, and love.[37]

27. This points to a purpose, rarely articulated explicitly, for weaponized starvation, namely stopping the targeted community from continuing to exist as *a functioning, moral community* of dignified families and persons. To return to the comparison with slavery, the aim is a form of *social death*. To borrow from Lemkin's lecture on the Holodomor, it is to break the *national spirit*. These societal aspects of starvation should not be seen as a *byproduct* of starvation, but as *central to it*.

28. Another way of formulating the logic of the starvation siege is as follows. It is generally acknowledged that in a population subjected to starvation, it is the strongest who starve last—children first, adult civilians next, armed men last. Thus, for example, a besieging force intending to deny all foodstuffs to a defending force of 50,000 fighters within an enclave of 2 million people will therefore need to starve the 1,950,000 non-combatants before the fighters can be expected to succumb. As the full accomplishment of this sequence of events is an intrinsically improbable scenario, the purpose of a starvation siege is therefore to destroy the cohesion of the group, turning it against the defenders who are refusing to surrender.

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[35] Ginzburg, Lidiya, *Notes from the Blockade*, (trans Alan Myers), Penguin, 2016 [1984].
[36] Dannenbaum, Tom, 'Siege Starvation: A war crime of societal torture,' *Chicago Journal of International Law* 22.2 (2022): 368-442.
[37] Dannenbaum, 2022, pp. 414 and 424-5.

29. From these observations, it is possible to return to Lemkin's insight that starvation is a weapon aimed at the 'spirit' of a community or a nation, and formulate how it is an instrument of genocide. This paper will leave the development of the relevant legal theory to others.

(II) Humanitarianism and Counterinsurgency

30. Food rations and other emergency relief, while mitigating some of the most extreme biological consequences for individuals, can be part of a war strategy. There is extensive legal and ethical commentary on this. This section will focus on the political sociology of humanitarian action during a common form of wartime famine, namely counterinsurgency (COIN). Although contexts of COIN were foundational to the emergence of colonial and (especially) American aid programming, this strand has been relatively neglected in the literature and its application to policy.

31. It is notable that international humanitarian law prohibiting starvation has lagged other elements of the laws of war.[38] It was only in 1977 that the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions included the explicit prohibition of starvation. This was after European powers (Britain, France and Portugal) had abandoned their colonies in Asia and Africa and after the U.S. had withdrawn from Vietnam, and colonial and post-colonial COIN was no longer a priority concern for the major powers.

32. Modern humanitarianism traces its origin to the foundation of the Red Cross by Henri Dunant following the Battle of Solferino in 1863. Its initial principal focus was wounded soldiers, sailors and prisoners of war in European wars, in due course extending across the world and to civilians. However, since World War Two, the closest and most problematic entanglement of humanitarianism and war has arisen in the context of COIN.

33. The lineage of COIN originates with colonial suppression of armed insurrections aiming to resist or throw off foreign rule. The overall aim of colonial era pacification and COIN was the destruction of the colonized people's capacity for autonomous political agency. The earliest theorists of colonial wars were candid that their methods were intended to terrorize and break the spirit of the native people and would often involve methods that were barbarous and would shock the humanitarian.[39] Some specific colonial campaigns, such as the German genocide of the Herero and Nama in South-West Africa, used starvation to the point of annihilation. In others, the logic was consistent with Lemkin's framing of the two stages of destroying the 'national pattern' of the colonized and imposing a new one.

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[38] Mulder, Nicholas, and Boyd Van Dijk. "Why did starvation not become the paradigmatic war crime in international law?" *Contingency in International Law* (2021): 370-388.

[39] Callwell, C.E., *Small Wars: Their principle and practice*, (third edn.), Lincoln, Bison Books, 1996 (first pub. 1899).

34. The concentration camp, in its original meaning as a place for gathering a scattered population so as to control them, was first used by the Spanish in Cuba and then the British in South Africa. The theory was to create two separate zones. In one, the military zone, the counterinsurgents apply maximum force, including destruction of communities and food systems. In the other, the protected zone, the authorities control rations in camps, fenced villages or hamlets, or similar enclaves. A paradigmatic example was the British 'Operation Starvation' in Malaya, which was a combination of food denial operations in rural areas, alongside concentrating the relocated population in protected villages, where all food rations and medical supplies were strictly controlled.[40]

35. Late-colonial practitioners of COIN crafted a narrative whereby they claimed that their wars—notably France's war in Algeria—could have been won if the right combination of tactics had been used. The most prominent theorists of this were Roger Trinquier[41] and David Galula.[42] In his authoritative world history of counterinsurgency, Douglas Porch describes these colonels' writings as idealized templates rather than actual histories.[43] Trinquier and Galula took isolated and brief tactical successes and argued that, had their superiors allowed them to take them to scale, they could have won the war—what Porch calls the 'we won the war on my front' trope.[44] The French 'COIN-istas' had proven skills in special force operations and measures for devastating the communities identified as insurgent, where their explicit goal was to render the areas uninhabitable. To a limited degree, the French authorities also provided food rations and health services. However, Galula's depiction of COIN as 'armed social work among grateful Muslims' is fantastical.[45] The French colonels neglected to mention that the strategic successes of colonial COIN invariably followed negotiations for the sovereign independence of the colonized nation.

36. The most sustained and comprehensive COIN campaign of the post-World War Two era was the American war in Vietnam. The U.S. went well beyond the rudimentary provision of rations and welfare services to a much broader spectrum of 'development'. The main organ for this was USAID, which was enlisted to fight what the generals called the 'other war', namely the fight for hearts and minds using material commodities.[46] USAID Offices of Rural Affairs and Public Safety were designed to 'conduct the conduct' of the South Vietnamese people through the Strategic Hamlet and Revolutionary Development

[40] Thompson, Sir Robert. *Defeating Communist Insurgency*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1966; Komer, Robert, 1972. 'The Malayan Emergency in Retrospect: Organization of a successful counterinsurgency effort,' Santa Monica, RAND Corporation.
[41] Trinquier, Roger, *Modern Wars: A French view of counterinsurgency*. Fort Leavenworth, KA, US Army Command and General Staff College, 1964.
[42] Galula, David. *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and practice*. Bloomsbury, 2006 (first pub. 1964).
[43] Porch, Douglas. *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the myths of the new way of war*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
[44] Porch, 2013, p. 201.
[45] Porch, 2013, p. 176.
[46] Elkind, Jessica. *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War*. University Press of Kentucky, 2016.

programs. It was a combination of a 'will to improve' and a 'will to police'.[47] This, of course, failed.

37. However, when the US occupied Afghanistan and Iraq a generation later, new COIN practitioners revived the 'hearts and minds' myth. The new U.S. manuals for COIN reproduced similar doctrines.[48] And in turn, a number of rural development practitioners, experts in governance and state-building, and humanitarian aid providers also accepted the overall rationale that the purpose of their exercise was remoulding the society of the occupied nation in the preferred image of a modern, institutionalized state. This was a much more attractive and apparently benevolent project than colonial subjugation, but nonetheless shared an orientalist lineage and a discomfort with acknowledging the autonomous political agency of the occupied people.[49] In such contexts, emergency relief can merge into 'humanitarian violence.'[50]

38. Governments waging counterinsurgencies in Colombia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iraq, Myanmar, Sudan, Syria and elsewhere adopted many of the same methods as the colonial powers and the U.S. In these contexts, international humanitarian agencies and their western donors had less of a direct stake in the political-military outcome and were more concerned with the needs and dignity of the afflicted populations. For large aid givers, a new feature of these wars was that they also engaged with the insurgents. Sometimes aid agencies were openly in political solidarity with insurgents, and on a few occasions their western donors were so too. Notable cases in point have been the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, the Tigray People's Liberation Front in Ethiopia, the Sudan People's Liberation Army in southern Sudan, Kurdish nationalists in northern Iraq while Saddam Hussein was in power, and anti-government forces in the Syrian civil war. These experiences also exposed humanitarians to the aid-control practices of insurgents, that sometimes administered large civilian populations. The debates tended therefore to treat insurgents and counterinsurgents on an equal basis, which obscured the particular characteristics of COIN. The basic questions addressed in the humanitarian debates have been how to provide life-saving assistance without becoming complicit in belligerents' war strategies and war crimes.[51] These debates led to two crucial outcomes.

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[47] Attewell, Wesley. "Ghosts in the Delta: USAID and the historical geographies of Vietnam's 'other'war." *Environment and Planning A* 47, no. 11 (2015): 2257-2275.

[48] Department of Defense, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency,* Department of the Army, December 2006; Petraeus, David, and William Darley (eds.) 'Military Review: Special Edition: Counterinsurgency Reader,' *Military Review*, December 2006; Roper, Daniel, and William Caldwell (eds.) 'Military Review: Special Edition, Counterinsurgency Reader II.' *Military Review*, August 2008.

[49] Porch, 2013.

[50] Weizman, Eyal. *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian violence from Arendt to Gaza*. Verso Books, 2012.

[51] De Waal, Alex. *Famine Crimes: Politics and the disaster relief industry in Africa*. Indiana University Press, 1997; Terry, Fiona. *Condemned to Repeat? The paradox of humanitarian action*. Cornell University Press,

39. The first is that liberal humanitarian practitioners, theorists and lawyers are alive to the implications of this issue. Although the key dilemmas remain unresolved, the humanitarian system has been responsive. Among the results are a raft of humanitarian principles, greater awareness of the requirements of international humanitarian law and the prohibitions in international criminal law, and obligations such as those enshrined in Security Council resolution 2417.[52]

40. The second outcome is a description of a raft of ways in which humanitarian aid can indeed become integral warfighting strategies. Thus: (i) aid and aid logistics can be stolen by a belligerent for its war aims, used to feed soldiers, or sustain civilians in garrisons that would otherwise have fallen, or sold on the market; (ii) aid can be a lure to draw people out of rebel-controlled areas, an inducement for people to abandon their homes or a material lubricant for forced relocation; (iii) individual aid rations can be used to incentivize informants and cooperants, thereby undermining solidarity, and aid projects can be used as political inducement to larger groups; and (iv) aid operations can be a method of concealment and a propaganda tool, to try to show the world that the perpetrator is caring for members of the target group, and to deflect calls for other forms of international action.

41. This debate has shifted attention from the overall political rationale of colonial and U.S. COIN and the role of material aid in its strategies. The debate is highly salient in the case of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

42. In 2002, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon remarked that Israel could have won France's war in Algeria. He was inspired by reading the French colonels and was said to have Alistair Horne's *A Savage War of Peace*, a definitive account of that war, at his bedside.[53] Horne himself asked rhetorically in a newspaper column, 'Should I be flattered, or disturbed? Under the circumstances, I think the latter.' He concluded, 'As for [Sharon's] bedside reading, the only advice is—don't follow the French example. Don't misread the lessons of Algeria.'[54] Tactfully, he was suggesting that Sharon should follow the example of President Charles de Gaulle and withdraw from the Occupied Palestinian Territories.[55] Studies of Israeli COIN suggest that the tactics of colonial-era COIN have been refined to astonishing levels of technological sophistication and comprehensiveness, including aid provision.[56]

2002; Rieff, David. *A bed for the night: Humanitarianism in crisis*. Simon and Schuster, 2003; Slim, Hugo. *Humanitarian Ethics: A guide to the morality of aid in war and disaster*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

[52] United Nations, Security Council resolution 2417, 24 May 2018.

[53] Horne, Alistair. *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962*. New York, Penguin, 1979; Mack, Andrew, "Sharon's Algerian Shadow," *Globe and Mail*, 7 May 2002

[54] Horne, Alistair, 'The danger in Sharon using my book on the Algerian war,' *Daily Telegraph*, 1 June 2002

[55] Gallagher, Nancy, 'Learning Lessons from the Algerian War of Independence', MERIP, Winter 2002, https://merip.org/2002/12/learning-lessons-from-the-algerian-war-of-independece/#[2].

[56] Bhungalia, Lisa. *Elastic empire: Refashioning war through aid in Palestine*. Stanford University Press, 2023; Weizman, Eyal. *Hollow land: Israel's architecture of occupation*. Verso books, 2024.

What this strategy is intended to accomplish is precisely what colonial COIN tried and failed to achieve, namely the erasure of political agency for the targeted nation.

43. The following fundamental principles govern the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality.[57] Not all humanitarian actors subscribe to all of these. It is possible, for example, to have humanitarian action in solidarity with a political actor, or that provides assistance to only a select community. National Red Cross and Red Crescent societies are not always neutral or independent. Belligerents and occupying powers have an obligation to provide humanitarian assistance, and those authorities cannot by definition be characterized as neutral or independent. An aid provider that works solely on one side of a conflict, providing assistance on the terms laid down by that conflict party, is not *ipso facto* disqualified from being 'humanitarian'.

44. However, the principle of 'humanity' is *not* negotiable. All readings of 'humanity' include notions of respect and dignity. The antithesis of humanity is dehumanization. The line that no humanitarian can cross is acting in a manner that fails to respect the fundamental dignity and humanity of human beings. A humanitarian could not, for example, support slavery and still qualify. Similarly, a humanitarian cannot be party to a project of inflicting social death or societal torture. Insofar as genocidal mass starvation is such a project, an actor that keeps people biologically alive while participating in their practical dehumanization cannot be 'humanitarian'.

45. The mode of operation of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation is detailed elsewhere. It is plausible to infer that the GHF was designed with several goals, including enticing people to relocate, surveilling them, as a pretext for blocking United Nations humanitarian action, and as an alibi when faced with allegations of deliberate starvation. The GHF is evidently a version of 'war humanitarianism' and insofar as it is embedded within a genocidal strategy can be identified as, arguably, the first ever instance of 'genocidal humanitarianism'—a term that is transparently self-contradictory. The GHF is thereby disqualified as a 'humanitarian' actor.

46. The implications of this claim can be summarized as follows, using a horticultural metaphor. Colonial era COIN tried to pull out weeds while providing a little fertilizer to some patches of grass. That is, it provided limited rations and did not make use of organizations that called themselves 'humanitarian'. Post-colonial COIN as practiced by the U.S. in Vietnam and Afghanistan industrialized the weed-killing and scaled up the cultivation of the favoured varieties. The army did the first part and USAID and client organizations did the second. Elsewhere in the world, humanitarian agencies and their governmental donors often did not want to pass judgement on which plants were weeds

[57] International Committee of the Red Cross, 'The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement,' Geneva, nd.

and which were not. As a result, they fashioned their norms and practices for operating in war zones where the U.S. was not a belligerent power, and the debates and norms on humanitarianism in war reflect this. Israel's practice in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is mowing the grass. It does not want anything to grow, with the possible exception of those tough weeds that flourish in toxic soils. Israeli practice most closely resembles colonial era COIN, with tactics elevated to strategy, and without any offer of political agency to the Palestinian people. In the Palestinian context, therefore, humanitarians find themselves in unfamiliar moral and political territory.

47. Insofar as Israeli COIN seeks to destroy the coherence and political agency of the targeted people, it fits within Lemkin's sociology of genocide. In these conditions, rations may keep individuals alive even while their society is destroyed. Within the framing of 'social death', eating the rations of the controlling power is the substitute for death by starvation, but at the cost of loss of community and dignity. Within the framing of 'societal torture', seeking out those rations is trying to satisfy immediate biological cravings at the expense of the characteristics that make humanity meaningful.

48. In Gaza today, those Palestinians surviving today, who do not perish on account of the current starvation and other onslaught, will be physically and mentally damaged and will face the spectre of collective social death.

(III) Famine Early Warning and the Obligation to Prevent Genocide

49. In common with the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the principal *purpose* of humanitarian information systems is prevention. Because the *outcome* of starvation takes time to unfold, accurate and timely information is an essential resource. It takes sixty to eighty days for a healthy adult to starve to death when deprived of all nutrients. When some sustenance is provided, it is longer. For children and vulnerable people, it is quicker. Much depends on the disease environment, shelter, clean water and other conditions of life. This means that the perpetrator has opportunities to prevent the outcome of starvation, should he or she wish to do so.

50. Perpetrators cannot plead ignorance. It is a matter of common sense that people deprived of food will starve. Also available are expert assessments.

51. The Integrated food security Phase Classification (IPC) mechanism was developed in the 2000s in East Africa and adopted by the United Nations to accomplish three tasks. The first was to provide timely warning of crises. The second was to provide a transparent rationale for targeting of aid commodities among different communities. This would also help aid agencies explain and justify their allocations to those communities. Third was to standardize diagnostic thresholds for different levels of crisis, emergency and famine. The

IPC drew on work by Paul Howe and Stephen Devereux on 'famine scales.'[58] Howe and Devereux had proposed three dimensions for measuring famines: (i) magnitude (numbers who perish); (ii) intensity (how bad conditions are in a particular locale); and (iii) duration. For obvious reasons, (i) and (iii) are not useful for either prevention or real-time diagnosis. We should not have to wait to count the graves before determining 'famine.' Consequently, the dimension adopted by the IPC was intensity (re-named 'severity').

52. The IPC also established a Famine Review Committee (FRC), an independent panel of experts, to assess cases in which IPC data indicated that there was a prospect of the threshold of IPC Phase 5, 'catastrophe' or 'famine' being approached or crossed. Excluding the case of Gaza, the FRC has considered nineteen cases of actual or potential famine, including several instances of repeated examinations of the same crisis.[59] On five occasions it has determined 'famine'. Three were definite (Somalia, 2011; Unity State in South Sudan, 2017; parts of Darfur and Kordofan, Sudan, 2025). One (Borno state, Nigeria, 2016) was retrospective and two were 'famine with reasonable evidence,' (Pibor, South Sudan, 2020 and parts of Darfur and Kordofan, Sudan, 2024). This indicates the committee's best judgement on the basis of incomplete data. The other cases can be considered 'near famines' in several variants. Twice, the FRC reported 'projection of famine' based on reasonable inference from an existing trajectory. Four times it identified a 'risk of famine.' The most significant of these was in Tigray, Ethiopia, in July 2021 when the FRC report mapped out four scenarios, with forecast timings for when famine conditions would develop according to the more pessimistic scenarios.[60] The most pessimistic scenario did in fact play out but the Ethiopian government prevented the IPC from gathering data to confirm what had indeed happened. On four occasions the IPC identified a catastrophe short of famine, namely large populations in IPC phase 5.

53. The point of this elaboration is to underline that the language used by the IPC FRC in identifying a 'projection' or 'risk' of famine is no less important than any determination of famine *per se*. This is particularly salient in the case of Gaza. For example, in June 2024 the FRC assessed the claim by one of its partner agencies, the U.S. FEWS NET that its data indicated famine conditions. It could not confirm the claim.[61] The FRC emphasized: two key points:

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[58] Howe, Paul, and Stephen Devereux. "Famine intensity and magnitude scales: a proposal for an instrumental definition of famine." *Disasters* 28, no. 4 (2004): 353-372.

[59] World Peace Foundation, 'Contemporary Famines and Near-Famines,' WPF, 2025. https://worldpeacefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/IPC-FRC-cases-without-agg-mort-301224.pdf The 'famine' determination for Somalia in 2011 was issued prior to the formation of the FRC but is included because the same method was used.

[60] IPC, Famine Review Committee, 'Ethiopia: Famine Review Committee confirms very high levels of acute food insecurity and Risk of Famine in Tigray,' July 2021. https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/alerts-archive/issue-42/en/

[61] IPC, Famine Review Committee, 'Review of the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) IPC-Compatible Analysis for the Northern Governorates of the Gaza Strip, May 2024, Conclusions and Recommendations.' 4 June 2024.

> Firstly, all stakeholders who use the IPC for high-level decision-making must understand that whether a Famine classification is confirmed does not in any manner change the fact that extreme human suffering is without a doubt currently ongoing in the Gaza Strip and does not in any manner change the immediate humanitarian imperative to address this civilian suffering by enabling complete, safe, unhindered, and sustained humanitarian access into and throughout the Gaza Strip, including through ceasing hostilities. *All actors should not wait until a Famine classification for the current period is made to act accordingly*. [Emphasis added]
>
> Secondly, the FRC would like to highlight that the very fact that we are unable to endorse (or not) FEWS NET's analysis is driven by the lack of essential up to date data on human well-being in Northern Gaza, and Gaza at large. Thus, the FRC strongly requests all parties to enable humanitarian access in general, and specifically to provide a window of opportunity to conduct field surveys in Northern Gaza to have more solid evidence of the food consumption, nutrition, and mortality situation.

54. These paragraphs constitute a complaint that the IPC is being misused by decision-makers. When governments do so, they are seeking to avoid two responsibilities: (i) to act in a timely manner to prevent unacceptable outcomes, and (ii) to obtain the necessary data for a more complete assessment.

55. The IPC, along with its partner FEWS NET, is the best famine early warning system that exists. Its biggest challenge is forecasting in complex situations where there is a mix of factors endogenous to food systems and political and military drivers. There is ongoing research into trajectories into famine, that specifies different pathways, including tipping points at which starvation escalates. There has also been an attempt by the IPC to incorporate information about conflict into its modelling.[62] However, a mechanism such as this has no reliable means of incorporating assessments of military dynamics, and no means of assessing belligerent intent. The way that the FRC has managed this is by mapping out different scenarios, from which such predictions can be derived.

56. The IPC requires data. Humanitarian data is not only essential for the determination of the level of food crisis prevailing, but also for the effective and efficient targeting of humanitarian assistance. A commitment to prevent famine implies a duty to collect the needed data.

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https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/documents/IPC_Famine_Review_Committee_Report_FEWS_NET_Gaza_4June2024.pdf

[62] IPC, IPC Guidance Note: IPC Conflict Analysis Reference Document, Rome, October 2024. https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/resources/resources-details/en/c/1158929/

57. The suppression of information is a common characteristic of man-made famines.[63] It follows that censorship and denial can be taken as *prima facie* indicators of culpability. Those responsible for famine commonly take the absence of firm data for the existence of famine as evidence for the absence of famine. This is a ruse that should be called out.

58. Additionally and of special note, the 'acute food insecurity' metrics used by the IPC include measurements of societal distress, such as the kinds of desperate survival strategies mentioned in the previous section. To repeat, these are not mere side-effects of famine, they are what *defines the condition*. These kinds of social indicators were widely used in historic famine early warning and response systems, prior to the standardization of nutritional survey methods and metrics.[64] Recent famine alerts by the FRC specifically mention the social dimensions of humanitarian catastrophe. To give one highly pertinent example, the FRC wrote in the May 2025 Gaza 'Snapshot' report, that the food crisis would: 'exacerbate civil unrest and competition over remaining scarce resources, further eroding whatever limited community coping and support mechanisms remain.'[65] These observations are directly relevant to the understanding of famine as social death.

59. The central point to be derived from this section is that timely information is available about how scenarios of starvation can be expected to unfold. Based on IPC data and FRC warnings, the responsible authority will know, with a high level of confidence, what will happen in the normal course of events if policies relating to starvation continue to be implemented. The perpetrator may deny the purpose to starve a population but cannot deny knowledge that this will be the outcome.

[63] De Waal, Alex, 'How Famine Denial Works: Its past and present, from the Holodomor to Gaza.' *Boston Review,* 14 November 2024. https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/engineers-of-calamity/ . See also: DeFalco, Randle C. "Time and the visibility of slow atrocity violence." *International Criminal Law Review* 21, no. 5 (2021): 905-934.

[64] Brennan, Lance. "The development of the Indian famine codes personalities, politics, and policies." In Bruce Currey & Graeme Hugo (eds.) *Famine: As a Geographical Phenomenon*, Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1984 pp. 91-111.

[65] IPC, 'Gaza Strip: IPC Acute Food Insecurity and Acute Malnutrition Special Snapshot, April-September 2025,' 12 May 2025, https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Gaza_Strip_Acute_Food_Insecurity_Malnutrition_Apr_Sept2025_Special_Snapshot.pdf.