

Note for teachers: This document-based essay test is a final review activity for Global History 10. Documents are designed to be used for in-class instruction prior to essay writing, however the process can be adapted for different situations.

Document-based Essay: Was British policy in Ireland during the Great Irish Famine an example of genocide?

Some historians and political activists have argued that British policy in Ireland during the Great Irish Famine was an example of genocide. They believe it should be classified and studied along side other atrocities in world history, such as Nazi efforts to exterminate European Jews during World War II (the Holocaust), Turkish attacks on Armenians during the era of World War I, the Atlantic Slave Trade and its impact on Africa, the destruction of native civilizations following the Columbian encounter, and the mass slaughter of members of the Tutsi tribe during 1994 civil war in Rwanda.

Attached are documents that define genocide (**document A**), describe events that have been called examples of genocide (**documents B-F**) and documents describing the Great Famine in Ireland and British policy during famine (**documents G-N**).

1) Use document A and at least one document from among documents B-F to explain your view of the type of event that should be considered genocide. You must refer to specific documents in your answer (5 points).

2) Discuss whether, based on your definition, British policy during the Great Irish Famine was an example of genocide. In this part of your essay, you must use information from at least **four** documents that describe the Great Irish Famine and British policy (documents G-N) during the famine (20 points).

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Document A) Defining Genocide

Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1951

According to this United Nations treaty, signed by the United States, genocide consists of "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, such as: a) killing members of the group; b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

**Documents B-F) Documents from Events
described as examples of Genocide**

Document B) The Nuremberg Racial Laws, Germany, 1935

A Jew cannot be a citizen of the Reich. He cannot exercise the right to vote; he cannot occupy public office.

Jews are prohibited from displaying the Reich and national flag.

Any marriages between Jews and citizens of German or kindred blood are herewith forbidden. Marriages entered into despite this law are invalid.

Extramarital relations between Jews and citizens of German or kindred blood are herewith forbidden.

Source: R. Greaves et al, Civilizations of the World (NY: Harper &1990)

Document C) An Historian Discusses Turkey's Attack on the Armenians during the era of World War I

"On the night of 24 April, some 1,000 prominent Armenians were arrested in the capital and secretly murdered, leaving the others numbed by terror. The remaining males in each village were summoned by the town crier to report immediately, led out of town, and slain. Women, children, and a few infirm males previously exempted were bidden by the crier to prepare themselves for deportation. They were driven into the desert by soldiers, staggering along until they dropped from drought, starvation, the lash, or their festering wounds. Women might elect or be selected to become wives of Muslims, thus gaining exemption but also requiring them to part with their children. Toynbee (a British historian), assessing all the evidence, estimated that two thirds of the 1,800,00 Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1914 were annihilated or deported to the desert.

Source: H. Fein, *Accounting for Genocide* (NY: Free Press, 1978)

Document D) An Enslaved African describes the middle passage, 1789

"I was soon put down under the decks (of the slave ship). I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat. I now wished for the last friend, death to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely.

The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, almost suffocated us. The air soon became unfit for respiration and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died. The shrieks of the women and the groans of the dying, rendered it a scene of horror almost inconceivable.

I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost continually on deck. I expected every hour to share the fate of my companions, some of whom were almost daily brought upon deck at the point of death.

One day, two of my wearied countrymen, who were chained together, preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings and jumped into the sea. I believe many more would very soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew.

Source: G. Vassa. *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, reprinted in H. Gates, ed. *The Classic Slave Narratives* (NY: New American Library, 1987).

Document E) Native American Population of Central Mexico (in millions)

[illegible]

1500 1520 1540 1560 1580 1600 1620

Source: B. Beers, *World History: Patterns of Civilization* (NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991), p. 360.

Document F) Civil War in Rwanda, 1994

Photo caption: In Nyarubuye, 10,000 Tutsi were killed by Hutu in 1994's bloodletting, and the skulls of many who died in a classroom are still displayed.

Source: *The New York Times*, April 6, 1999, p. A3.

Documents G-N) Documents from the Great Irish Famine

Document G) Contemporaries describe the Great Irish Famine, 1845-1846

Letter from Father Theobald Matthew to Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Charles Trevelyan, August 7, 1846

"Divine Providence, in its inscrutable ways, has again poured out upon us the vial of its wrath. A blast . . . has passed over the land, and the hopes of the poor potato cultivators are totally blighted, and the food of a whole nation has perished. . . . In many places the wretched people were seated on the fences of their decaying gardens, wringing their hands and wailing bitterly the destruction that had left them foodless."

Source: P. Gray, *The Irish Famine* (NY: Abrams, 1995).

An article in *The Spectator*, October 25, 1845

"Ireland is threatened with a thing that is read of in history and in distant countries, but scarcely in our own land and time - a famine. Whole fields of the root have rotted in the ground, and many a family sees its sole provision for the year destroyed."

Source: P. Gray, *The Irish Famine* (NY: Abrams, 1995).

Document H) Estimated Population of Ireland, 1841-1871

1841	8,175,000
1851	6,552,000
1861	5,799,000
1871	4,412,000

Source: Helen Litton (1994). *The Irish Famine*. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, p. 8.

Document I) Ejectment (eviction)

Source: The Illustrated London News, December 16, 1848

Document J) Excerpt from an editorial in The London Times, 1846

"The (Irish) people have made up their minds to report the worst and believe the worst. Human agency is now denounced as instrumental in adding to the calamity (disaster) inflicted by Heaven. It is no longer submission to Providence, but a murmur (complaint) against the Government. . . . The Government provided work for a people who love it not. It made this the absolute condition of relief. The Government was required to ward off starvation, not to pamper indolence (laziness). Alas! the Irish peasant had tasted of famine and found that it was good. . . . There are ingredients in the Irish character which must be modified and corrected before either individuals or Government can hope to raise the general condition of the people. . . For our own parts, we regard the potato blight as a blessing."

Source: *The London Times*, September 22, 1846.

Document K) A political cartoon from Punch, a British newspaper

Document L) Debating British Policy during the Great Irish Famine

Charles Trevelyan, the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, defended British policy in Ireland during the Great Irish Famine.

"That indirect permanent advantages will accrue to Ireland from the scarcity, and the measures taken for its relief, I entertain no doubt. . . . Besides, the greatest improvement of all which could take place in Ireland would be to teach the people to depend upon themselves for developing the resources of the country."

"For several centuries we were in a state of open warfare with the native Irish, who were treated as foreign enemies, and were not admitted to the privileges and civilizing influences of English law, even when they most desired it. Now, thank God, we are in a different position; and although many waves of disturbance must pass over us before that troubled sea can entirely subside, and time must be allowed for morbid (bad) habits to give place to a more healthy action, England and Ireland are, with one great exception, the subject to equal laws; and so far as the maladies of Ireland are traceable to political causes, nearly every practical remedy has been applied. The deep and inveterate root of social evil remained, and this has been laid bare by a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence. God grant that the generation to which this great opportunity has been offered may rightly perform its part, and that we may not relax our efforts until Ireland fully participates in the social health and physical prosperity of Great Britain."

Isaac Butt , a leading Irish Conservative, demanded more British aid for the poor.

"Can we wonder if the Irish people believe that the lives of those who have perished have been sacrificed by a deliberate compact to the gains of English merchants and if this belief has created among all classes a feeling of deep dissatisfaction, not only with the ministry but with English rule. What can be more absurd, what can be more wicked, than for men professing attachment to an imperial Constitution to answer claims now put forward for state assistance to the unprecedented necessities of Ireland, by talking of Ireland being a drain upon the English treasury? If Cornwall (England) had been visited with the scenes that have desolated Cork (Ireland), would similar arguments been used? Would men have stood up and denied that Cornwall was entitled to have the whole country share the extraordinary loss?

Source: "The Famine in the Land," Dublin University Magazine, XXIX, April 1847.

Document M) Overseas Migration from Ireland, 1842 to 1855

Year	Irish Emigrants	Year	Irish Emigrants
1842	89,000	1849	215,000
1843	37,500	1850	209,000
1844	53,500	1851	250,000
1845	75,000	1852	221,000
1846	106,000	1853	192,000
1847	214,000	1854	150,000
1848	179,000	1855	79,000

"The great tide of Emigration flows steadily westward. The principal emigrants are Irish peasants and laborers. It is calculated that at least four of every five persons who leave the shores of the old country to try their fortunes in the new, are Irish. Since the fatal days of the potato famine and the cholera, the annual number of emigrants have gone on increasing, until they have become so great as to suggest the idea, and almost justify the belief, of a gradual depopulation of Ireland."

Source: P. Gray, *The Irish Famine* (NY: Abrams, 1995)

Document N) John Mitchel, Irish Nationalist, in *The Last Conquest of Ireland*, 1860

"There began [in 1847] to be an eager desire in England to get rid of the Celts by emigration; for though they were perishing fast of hunger and typhus, they were not perishing fast enough. . . . No sack of Magdeburg, or ravage of the Palatinate ever approached the horror and dislocation to the slaughters done in Ireland by mere official red tape and stationery, and the principles of political economy. . . . The Almighty sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine."