

## Famine and War

R Tamas

### ABSTRACT

*History records that mankind has suffered at intervals from great famines. As recently as 1943, at least a million people died of famine in Bengal. In January 1943, a lot of soldiers of the Royal Hungarian Army died in Russia, at the River Don, because of the lack of food supply and insufficient healthcare. The enormous advances of science in this century have made the prevention and relief of famine technically easier.*

*Subsequently, in many parts of the world, famine conditions have arisen, but fortunately on a smaller scale. In this work an attempt is made to set out a few general principles of famine.*

## El Hambre y la Guerra

R Tamas

### RESUMEN

*La historia registra que la humanidad ha padecido grandes hambrunas a intervalos irregulares. Tan recientemente como 1943, por lo menos un millón de personas murieron de hambre en Bengala. En enero de 1943, muchos soldados del Ejército Real Húngaro murieron en Rusia, en el Río Don, debido a la falta de suministro de alimentos e insuficiente cuidado de la salud. Los enormes adelantos de la ciencia en este siglo han hecho técnicamente más fácil la prevención y alivio del hambre. Con posterioridad, en muchas partes del mundo, han surgido condiciones de hambruna, aunque afortunadamente en menor escala. Este trabajo representa un esfuerzo por exponer algunos principios generales de la hambruna.*

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### INTRODUCTION

In tropical and subtropical countries large numbers of people have lived and continued to live under yearly threat of drought. A failure of the rains, often in successive seasons, has been a frequent cause of famine.

The great Irish famines of the nineteenth century were caused by the destruction of the potato crops by a fungus which produced a disease known as 'the blight'. Soldiers of the Royal Hungarian Army ate only potato and carrots in Russia in 1943 and famine occurred when these crops were destroyed by disease. Whenever people are largely dependent on a single crop for their main source of food, there is always the risk of famine when that crop is destroyed.

Wars have been directly responsible for many famines throughout history as food shortages are the inevitable result of all wars and these can readily lead to famine conditions. Earthquakes and floods are a constant natural threat to man in many parts of the world. Of the many effects of famine, it is important for purposes of relief, to keep certain principles constantly in mind.

It is of prime importance to procure and distribute sufficient food to prevent such deaths. The number of deaths from starvation depends on the severity of the famine and the effectiveness of relief organization. It is natural for starving peoples and soldiers, if there is no food in their immediate neighbourhood, to go in search of food. If such wandering takes place on a large scale, social chaos is inevitable and all relief work becomes many times more difficult.

Large epidemics of relapsing fever, influenza, tuberculosis, enteric fever – or indeed of any infectious disease

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From: Dr R Tamas, Zrínyi Hungarian Defence University Budapest.

Correspondence: Dr R Tamas, St John's Hospital Diósárok U 1–3 Budapest, 1125 Hungary. E-mail: drt @ t-online.hu

may be associated with famine. The rapid spread of infectious diseases among starving peoples and soldiers is attributed to the ease with which the infecting organism can pass from person to person as a result of overcrowding and the breakdown of normal sanitary arrangements. It is the absence of all hygienic precautions that is responsible for epidemics, mainly in war-time, rather than an increased susceptibility of the starving body to infective micro-organisms.

In famine, there are usually not enough doctors or nurses; hospital beds and equipment are insufficient; drugs and vaccines are scarce. The efficient organization of relief depends on accurate assessments of the course of the famine. The number of people likely to be in need of relief in the near future must be forecast. Great disasters seldom arise suddenly and without warning. If possible, the causes of death and the nature of the diseases requiring hospital treatment should be stated. An adequate supply of sanitary stores, including vaccines, and disinfectants, should be available also in war-time, with sufficient reserves kept in medical stores to meet any further emergency.

In the early stages of famine, rapid recovery frequently follows a few days of feeding and attention to minor

ailments. If treatment is neglected at this stage, the condition of the patient may rapidly deteriorate. It is therefore very important to give the best medical care to persons with even minor illnesses.

In summary, famine relief in war-time inevitably presents many and diverse problems. It is often difficult for a worker on the spot to sort out what is essential from what is only desirable. It is hoped that this paper would stimulate thought on the principles of relief, for in famine, forethought is the best antidote to disaster.

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