



ANAS DAMASHQY/ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES

Famine: The Black Horseman Is Not Finished Riding

Famine is happening now, and it's about to get worse—and not because of environmental disasters or overpopulation.

- Jeremiah Jacques
- [20-11-2018](#)

What happens when there's no food around? A food-deprived person's body begins breaking down muscle tissue in order to keep the heart and other vital organs functioning.

As the stomach atrophies, the feeling of hunger is diminished. By the time 30 percent of normal body weight is lost, deep lethargy sets in. Deteriorated muscles and severely dehydrated skin make movement extremely painful. Once 40 percent of normal weight is gone, the likelihood of recovery is near zero. The starving person becomes highly susceptible to communicable diseases. He generally cannot tell that he is thirsty; dehydration is often the final cause of death. This experience is heartbreaking to even think about. But it is the way hundreds of millions of people throughout history have died.

Over the last three decades, however, the world appeared to have nearly conquered the scourge of famine. It was largely eradicated, remaining in only the most remote and war-torn regions. The risk of dying from starvation had dwindled to its lowest levels since civilization began.

But famine is about to make a dramatic comeback.

"[M]ortality in great and calamitous famines has all but disappeared. [B]ut we also have reason to be fearful," writes humanitarian crisis expert Alex de Waal in his 2018 book *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine Why?*

Because mankind's recent solutions are surprisingly frail.

Evidence shows that humanity's food supply system may already be eroding. If and when something goes wrong, the next wave of mass famines could be the worst in history.

'Silent Violence'

Over just the last 150 years, around 100 million people worldwide have died in famines. The famines from this era have something in common with most of the worst famines in all of history, something surprising and chilling: They were caused not by bad weather or overpopulation, but were *intentional acts* by some political authority.

"Starvation wasn't something that just happened; it was something that people did to one another," de Waal writes. In the majority of cases, "famines were not natural disasters, like earthquakes or hurricanes, but were the product of politics"

Since they are intentionally inflicted on people, Michael Watts, professor emeritus of geography and development studies at the University of California–Berkeley, describes famines as "silent violence."

De Waal's research says 70 percent of the 100 million starvation deaths of the last 150 years happened in famines that

were *entirely man-made*. These resulted from government policies intentionally designed to starve certain populations to death, or from authorities who recklessly enforced policies that were known to cause famine.

The Hungerplan

A tragic example of intentionally inflicted famine is the Nazi *Hungerplan* of 1941. The goal was to starve populations in the western Soviet Union to death, ridding the region of Slavs and Jews, whom Adolf Hitler called “useless eaters.” The Nazis wanted to then take the fertile lands formerly worked by Soviets and make them a breadbasket for Germany.

A high-level Nazi document, dated just a few weeks before Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, stated: “The war can only be continued if the entire [German] Armed Forces are fed from Russia during the third year of the war. As a result, there is no doubt that ‘x’ millions of people will starve to death if we take out from the country whatever we need.”

This was written on May 2, 1941, by Herbert Backe, state secretary of the Reich Ministry for Food and Agriculture. Elsewhere, Backe calculated that for the plan to succeed, all urban populations of the European Soviet Union—30 million men, women and children—must be starved to death.

Elsewhere in the Nazis’ occupational guidelines, meticulous plans to starve various “inferior” peoples were stated outright. In his 1944 book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, Rafael Lemkin published excerpts of such guidelines. They stated that while 100 percent of required daily carbohydrates must be given to Germans, only 76 to 77 percent should go to Poles, 58 percent to the French, 38 percent to Greeks, and 27 percent to Jews.

The Nazis were defeated before they could fully execute their vast plan of starvation. But even the most conservative estimates say that 4.7 million Soviet people died as a result of these ambitions, and most likely many more. As a comparison, the Nazis killed a total of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust.

Another notorious example of mass famine committed intentionally to exterminate populations was the Armenian genocide from 1914 to 1923, in which the Ottoman government killed more than 1 million people, a quarter of whom died from starvation and related disease. Still another was the Holodomor of the 1930s, detailed by *Trumpet* writer Andrew Miiller in our previous issue (theTrumpet.com/17677). De Waal estimates that this “man-made famine,” inflicted on the people of Ukraine by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and the Union of German Industrialists, killed about 3.3 million people. Other historians have placed the figure as high as 7.5 million.

The Most Devastating Famine in History

De Waal’s second category of human-inflicted famines is those caused by a government that relentlessly pursues policies known to be faminogenic. The textbook example of such an event was Chinese Communist dictator Mao Zedong’s “Great Leap Forward.”

A decade after the Chinese Communist party took power in 1949, Mao determined to modernize China. He wanted to skip the typical, slow process of economic maturation and instead transform straight from an agrarian society to an industrial superpower in just a few years.

In 1958, his government began relocating millions of Chinese peasants into mass communes. Most individual communes contained about 5,000 families, and the people were made to surrender ownership of animals and tools to the collective. Everything became property of the commune; individual, private farming was outlawed. By year’s end, 700 million people had been relocated into 26,578 communes.

Mao’s goal was to boost the nation’s agricultural productivity, despite moving many laborers from farming into the manufacturing sector. (Adults who didn’t tend to farming were assigned to “backyard” steel production furnaces. Some 600,000 of such furnaces were established throughout the country, but the steel produced in them was of such low quality it was useless.)

With fewer people available for farming, Mao ordered the use of many techniques that he said would boost efficiency to new levels: His infamous “deep plowing” command required workers to plow and plant up to six feet deep. His “close planting” technique called for 12.5 million seedlings per 2.5 acres rather than the customary 1.5 million. And the desire to produce “more, better, faster, cheaper” meant that fields were seldom given any time to remain fallow.

Mao also famously declared war on sparrows, accusing them of eating great quantities of grain seeds. His government said the “birds are public animals of capitalism.” He ordered citizens to destroy nests, kill chicks and bang pots and pans to frighten the birds away from landing until they dropped from the sky dead from exhaustion. These efforts dramatically depleted the population of Eurasian tree sparrows, driving them nearly into extinction.

The problem with the Great Sparrow Campaign was clear to many farmers within months: The sparrows ate not just grain but also insects. Without their main natural predator, insect populations, especially locusts, boomed—and then devoured vast swaths of China’s crops and countryside.

The flaws of Mao’s other policies became equally obvious to those striving to implement them. They were glaring and numerous. But the Great Helmsman was uninterested in hearing about those problems. Dr. Li Zhisui, Mao’s personal doctor

from 1955 until the dictator's death in 1976, told the *New York Times* in 1994 that Mao surrounded himself only with sycophants. "[H]e was a merciless tyrant who crushed anybody who disobeyed him," Li said. Anyone disobeying or even offering critical feedback would normally be executed. "The mistake of those who got purged was to see themselves as equal to him," Li said. "He wanted everybody to be subservient."

During the Great Leap Forward, loyalty to Mao took precedence over common sense. His officials continued ruthlessly enforcing policies, such as the Great Sparrow Campaign, even long after it was clear that they were tragically flawed. But month after month, at every failure, Mao refused to reevaluate, instead doubling down on his same disastrous policies.

The results were catastrophic beyond words. By 1962, at least 36 million people had died of starvation in what has come to be called the Great Famine, the largest mass starvation event in history.

Chinese researcher Yang Jisheng detailed the famine in his book *Tombstone*. "Documents report several thousand cases where people ate other people," Yang told npr in a 2012 interview. "Parents ate their own kids. Kids ate their own parents."

The most tragic aspect of the Great Famine is that, even with Mao's faulty policies being relentlessly pursued, the bulk of the deaths were still unnecessary. Even as the fields returned paltry harvests year after year, colossal grain warehouses housed enough food to feed the whole nation, but Mao's government refused to release it. "At the heart of it," wrote journalist John R. Platt, "the real cause was the Communist government, which—either as policy or by the selfish act of various officials—kept the grain from being delivered to those in need and covered up the problem."

This history of the Great Famine is disturbing proof of the remarkable power and inhumanity of the Chinese Communist Party. It is chilling that in China today, the official stance is that Mao Zedong was "70 percent right and 30 percent wrong."

Other notable examples of famine-producing policies being relentlessly enforced include Cambodian leader Pol Pot's "Super Great Leap Forward" attempt in the 1970s (though some chapters of this tragedy belong firmly in category one) and the North Korean crisis of the 1990s.

Willful Failure to Help

Another 18 percent of the 100 million starvation deaths from the last 150 years resulted from the failure of governments to react to climate conditions that caused food scarcity but that would have been wholly solvable with aid programs. De Waal describes this third category as instances when "public authorities are indifferent: Their policies may not be the principle cause of famine, but they do little or nothing to alleviate hunger."

A notable example in this category was the famine precipitated in Sudan in 1984, when then President Jaafar Nimeiri turned a blind eye to suffering caused by simultaneous drought and economic downturn, and he refused to accept international relief. "Nimeiri of the Sudan had deliberately suppressed information about the developing famine in his country, allowing the situation to develop to crisis proportions," the *New York Times* wrote on June 12, 1985. Those crisis proportions inflicted famine on 10 million people, and killed 240,000 of them.

Altogether, these kinds of easily preventable famines killed 19 million people in the last 150 years, or 18 percent of the total.

De Waal says that famines in the first category, including the *Hungerplan*, killed 8.3 million people, 8 percent of the total. And those in the second category, such as the Great Leap Forward, killed some 64 million people, or 62 percent of the famine deaths.

That means just 13 percent of the total 100 million famine deaths occurred because of external factors that authorities were genuinely incapable of addressing. In light of this, de Waal says, "the verb 'to starve' should be understood primarily in its transitive sense to indicate that some (powerful) people have starved other (powerless) people, leaving them to die—from hunger, disease, exhaustion or violence."

The Decline of Ruthless Strongmen

Famine experts often stress that the decline of famine in the last 30 years has been a historical anomaly. De Waal attributes it in small part to an increase in international humanitarian efforts such as those of the World Food Program. But he gives more credit to another, more significant, factor: "the decline of megalomania and of political attitudes that regard people as dispensable."

The main reason the last 30 years saw so few famines was the diminished number of leaders like Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot and Jaafar Nimeiri.

Charles Kenny, senior fellow at the Center for Global Development, agrees with this assessment and has observed that famines hardly ever happen in societies that are even relatively free. "In fact," he wrote for *Foreign Policy* on July 27, 2011, "they don't happen anymore in any country where leaders show the slightest interest in the wellbeing of their citizenry."

Famine Is Back?

When de Waal began writing *Mass Starvation* in early 2015, he had a sanguine view of mankind's progress in the war against famine. The facts looked promising. During a May 4 conference at Tufts University, he said: "When I started working on this, I thought I could write a history of famine, and say actually this is a problem we have resolved and confined to history."

But as he worked on the project, a shift began to set in that forced him to reconsider the book's premise and purpose. "Unfortunately, during the writing," he said, "famine made something of a comeback."

The first red flag came in December 2016, when the Famine Early Warning Systems Network announced that a famine was underway in some remote regions of Nigeria. By January 2017, threats of famine had also been identified in Yemen, Somalia and South Sudan. Soon after, alarms were sounded over Syria. It was clear that, after years of progress, global hunger numbers were rising again and poised to rise much more. A United Nations report showed that 11 percent of the global population in 2017 was chronically malnourished—an increase of 40 million over the year before.

"The past year has been unquestionably terrible, notes de Waal, with famine or near-famine conditions putting millions of people at risk of severe malnutrition and even death across Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Nigeria and Yemen," npr reported on January 19 of this year.

Instability in these regions sent the number of people needing humanitarian assistance soaring to unprecedented levels. This prompted Kimberly Flowers, director of the Global Food Security Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, to write her landmark article in late 2017: "The Four Famines: The Alarm Bells Are Ringing, But Who Is Listening?"

This is a pressing question. Who is listening to the warnings? Who is watching the gains start to reverse? Who is aware of how suddenly global stability could be shattered?

Morocco, Phosphorus, Iran and Famine

There is another nation that is increasingly susceptible to instability that could have *far-reaching* effects on the world's food supply: Morocco.

In the 1960s, the prevalent use of synthetic fertilizer greatly expanded the amount of land usable for agriculture around the globe and quadrupled the productivity of existing agricultural lands. It was enabled by the Haber process, which turns atmospheric nitrogen into a form biologically usable by crops. But when the amount of nitrogen in soils is increased, vegetation requires an equal increase in phosphorus, which is mined in the form of phosphate from geologic deposits.

Modern agricultural practices depend so heavily on phosphorus that experts say virtually no one could eat in today's world without it. In 2016, the *Atlantic* said phosphorus-dependent fertilizers have "allowed millions of people who would have otherwise starved to be fed"

But phosphorus is not a limitless resource. "We're on a finite planet with finite reserves of phosphorus," said investment expert Jeremy Grantham during a January 26 broadcast of *Planet Money*. "[W]e are mining it and running through the supply. That should make the hair on the back of everybody's neck bristle."

The limited supply of phosphorus has been well known for decades, but since it was cheap, no one worried.

Then came 2008.

When the global financial crisis struck, the price of phosphorus skyrocketed by 800 percent. As a result, food prices around the world soared. "I would argue that that was a shot across the bows," Grantham said. "That was the first warning to planet Earth that we are beginning to run out."

Another warning came the following year when the U.S. Geological Survey published a report saying peak phosphorous production was only 24 years away, meaning production would begin falling, possibly precipitously, after 2033.

Suddenly the eyes of the world were locked on Morocco. The North African country is home to some 75 percent of the world's known phosphorus reserves, giving it a near-monopoly on the multibillion-dollar trade of the mineral. (The next closest producer is China, with just under 6 percent.) The United States—the world's largest exporter of food—obtains 42 percent of its phosphorus imports from Morocco. Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, Lithuania and Canada are also major importers of Moroccan phosphorus.

Journalist Brendan Borrell recently investigated Morocco's phosphorus near-monopoly, and he found the nation to be disturbingly secretive about its reserves. "[I]t turns out that they don't want to tell you a lot," he told *Planet Money*. "[T]hey're trying to use this secrecy to their advantage. That way, they can dictate the price" (ibid).

"It's kind of amazing," Borrell said, "that our future food supply depends so much on what happens in this one country."

A better word than "amazing" may be "alarming." And the alarm becomes far more intense in light of the growing influence in Morocco of an actor that would relish the opportunity to decide who eats and who doesn't: *Iran*.

On May 1, the Moroccan government announced it had evidence that Iran was using its terrorist proxy Hezbollah to support

a separatist group called the Polisario Front. Since the 1970s, Polisario has been fighting for the independence of Western Sahara, a region claimed by the Moroccan government. The dispute has raged for more than 25 years, and now Iran—the world's number one state sponsor of terrorism—is reportedly giving Polisario military training and weapons.

Morocco's cache of phosphorus is split between Western Sahara and the rest of the country. The Moroccan government won't say how much of it lies in Western Sahara.

Geopolitical Futures wrote on August 23 that Iran's effort to destabilize Morocco happens at a time when "anti-West sentiment and religious zeal are both on the rise, which is raising concerns in [Morocco's capital] Rabat and elsewhere about the potential for religious extremism to take hold." The most recent sign of this came in July when 30,000 individuals protested in the streets, including at least 6,000 members of the banned al-Adl wal-Ihsan Islamist group and tens of thousands of youths. Geopolitical Futures wrote that these "recent developments in Morocco have put that country's stability in doubt" (ibid).

In any other nation, these developments would be worrisome. But since the world's food supplies depend so heavily on Morocco's phosphorus, they are nothing short of alarming. They show that global food supply chains are highly susceptible to disruption.

'We Need to Be Deeply Worried'

When the situation in Morocco and the new crises in Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Nigeria and Yemen are placed alongside the recent return of authoritarian governments in several other nations, it shows that severe famines could soon be prevalent once again. De Waal wrote, "[I]n so far as we see a resurgence of ideologies and practices that reduce people to instruments or impediments to other political ends, or exclude them from our political communities, we need to be deeply worried that mass starvation will return."

A survey of the world today—Russia, China, Turkey, Iran and several other nations—shows that the resurgence of such "ideologies and practices" is well underway. This indicates that mass famines could soon return in full force.

And when that resurgence is placed alongside the world's most authoritative forecasting source—the sure word of Bible prophecy—the indication becomes a certainty.

The Black Horse Will Ride

The biblical book of Revelation is about "things which shall be hereafter," or occurrences that would take place after the era of the Apostle John (Revelation 1:19). In Revelation 6, John discusses "the seven seals" that lead up to the return of Jesus Christ. The first four are often called the "four horsemen of the apocalypse." They represent religious deception, war, famine and pestilence (verses 1-8).

Regarding the third horse and its rider, John writes: "And when he had opened the *third* seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine" (verses 5-6).

This is a personification of mass famine, cruel and unyielding. The passage describes a time when scarcity of food is so great that staple grains are carefully weighed and prohibitively expensive.

Ellicott's Commentary says "measure" in verse 6 means "the amount of food sufficient to support a man for a day." And "penny" refers to "the usual daily pay of the laborer, and of the soldier." An entire day's wage would allow a man to buy only enough wheat to feed himself for that same day! Or he could buy enough of the less nutritious barley to feed three, making the feeding of a family nearly impossible.

Meanwhile, supplies of luxury items such as oil and wine are mostly unaffected but well out of reach of the ordinary laborer. Such selective scarcity, sparing the powerful elite while afflicting the common people, is in line with de Waal's description of famines as often being intentional "weapons of war" in the hands of corrupt authorities.

Revelation is not the only biblical book to mention an end-time return of famine. Jesus Christ Himself said that mass famines will occur prior to His return: "For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines ..." (Matthew 24:7; Mark 13:8; see also Luke 21:11).

Trumpet editor in chief Gerald Flurry and coauthor Wayne Turgeon wrote about the impending return of famine in their booklet [*The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*](#), stressing that these prophecies are for the present age. "We are not discussing some dusty old prophecies," they write. "These are dramatic, dire prophecies that lie directly in front of us! ... This great famine will eventually spread to every corner of the Earth before mankind repents in unconditional surrender to God."

They continue: "[T]his third horseman of famine will have a specific fulfillment. It is ready to gallop into our immediate future with an impact far beyond the historic and present-day occurrences of localized famines."

Mr. Flurry and Mr. Turgeon explain that although this points to a dark future, the Bible makes clear that God will provide a method of escape for those who will turn to Him. “The future appears very bleak,” they write. “But there is a way of escape (Revelation 12:13-17). God will hear and forgive anyone who will repent. The only ones promised divine protection are those few who have yielded to God and His way of life.”

The Scriptures reveal that the gains against famine that mankind has made in recent years will soon wither away. Evidence shows that scarcity is already returning to some regions and that mass famine is terribly imminent. The black horseman is not finished riding. But each individual could have some say as to whether he or she will be in his path—or not. ■

NI Four