DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

“FAMINE IN THE MODERN WORLD”

Organizing Questions
• What were the biggest famines in the 20th century and what caused them?
• Why have famines become less common in recent history?
• What are the main causes of famine now?

Summary
This discussion guide accompanies a 21-minute video in which Stanford and Hoover Institution scholar Dr. Bertrand Patenaude provides a comprehensive overview of famine in the 20th and 21st centuries. Dr. Patenaude explains how the main causes of famine have shifted over time and why famines still exist despite the prosperity and technology in today’s world. The video walks through the largest famines of the 20th century and this century and explains which areas are most susceptible to famine now. Dr. Patenaude ends with a cautionary note about why the frequency of famines may increase and where future famines are most likely to occur.

Objectives
Through the course of this discussion guide, students will
• recognize the main causes of famine and how these have shifted over time;
• examine why famines continue despite such advances in preventing them; and
• explain the importance of working to prevent famine even in places far from where they live.

Materials
Handout 1, Pre-Lesson Quiz
Handout 2, Video Notes
Handout 3, Famine Research Project
Handout 4, Notes on Presentations
Handout 5, Post-Lesson Quiz
Answer Key 1, Video Notes
Answer Key 2, Post-Lesson Quiz
Teacher Information, Video Transcript
Display 1, 1921–1922 Famine in Soviet Russia (in separate PDF)
Display 2, Areas at Risk of Famine in Early 2023 (in separate PDF)
Equipment

- Computer with Internet access and a Flash-enabled or HTML5-supported web browser
- Computer projector and screen

Teacher Preparation

Instructions and materials are based on a class size of 30 students. Adjust accordingly for different class sizes.

1. Make the appropriate number of copies of handouts.
2. Become familiar with the content of the handouts, answer keys, and displays.
4. Set up and test your class computer and projector before starting the lesson.

Time

Three 50-minute class periods, plus homework between class periods

Procedures

Day One

1. Explain to students that they will learn about famine in the modern world over the next several class periods. They will watch a video lecture by Stanford historian Dr. Bertrand Patenaude that explains the main causes of famine historically and in the 20th century, why famine continues to exist in the modern world, and ways to prevent famines and minimize the suffering they cause.

2. Distribute one copy of Handout 1, Pre-Lesson Quiz, to each student. Let students know that this quiz is simply designed to see how much they know about the topic of famine at this point. The quiz will not be collected or assessed. Allow students 10 minutes to complete the quiz. Ask students to keep the handout to refer to at the end of the lesson.

3. Project Display 1, 1921-1922 Famine in Soviet Russia, to students. Use the following points to narrate this display:
   - The work of the American Relief Administration (ARA) in Soviet Russia in 1921 and 1922 is central to the lecture, so it’s important to review this map.
   - This map shows the districts of the ARA in 1922.
   - This shows what was called “Soviet Russia” for a short time, from 1917 when the Communist Party took control of Russia until 1922. After that, Soviet Russia became part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), also known as the Soviet Union. The USSR existed until 1991.
   - In 1921 and 1922, there was a widespread famine in Soviet Russia. The famine areas centered on the Volga River and in southern Ukraine, visible on this map.
   - After World War I, the United States established the ARA to provide large-scale relief to Europe due to the food deprivation
caused by the war. The ARA then entered Soviet Russia when famine hit there.

• The lecture will provide more detail about the ARA’s activities.

4. Project Display 2, Areas at Risk of Famine in Early 2023, to students. Use the following points to narrate this display:

• This image is taken from a free online database called FEWS NET, which stands for the Famine Early Warning System Network. The United States established this in 1985 in the wake of the Ethiopian famine as a tool to help detect and thus prevent future famines.

• FEWS NET uses several types of data to predict which areas in the world are experiencing acute food insecurity and are thus at risk of famine.

• This map shows the regions of the world projected to experience the greatest acute food insecurity from February to May 2023.

• As you can see, acute food insecurity is worst in several countries that border the Red Sea, which separates East Africa from the Arabian Peninsula. These include Yemen to the east of the Red Sea and South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya in the Horn of Africa.

• In the video, Dr. Patenaude will talk about why this region has such high famine risk.

5. End the class period by distributing one copy of Handout 2, Video Notes, to each student. Instruct students to watch the video and complete this handout before the next class period. Warn students that several disturbing images will be shown in the video.

Before Day Two

Students watch Video, “Famine in the Modern World,” and complete Handout 2, Video Notes. Remind students to reserve 90–120 minutes to watch the video and complete the handout.

Day Two

1. Collect Handout 2, Video Notes, from each student. Use Answer Key 1, Video Notes, to assess student responses.

2. Organize the class into groups of five students each. Distribute one copy of Handout 3, Famine Research Project, to each student. Inform students that they have the rest of the class period to work on this assignment in their groups.

3. Check in on groups’ progress for the remainder of the class period.

Before Day Three

Allow students to finalize the assignment and prepare for their presentation as homework if needed. Remind them to ensure they have any visuals they plan to use during their presentation (charts, diagrams, slides, posters, etc.) ready before the next class period.
Day Three

1. Ask students to reconvene in their groups. Give them five minutes to finalize their summary and to select one or two group members to present to the rest of the class.

2. Distribute one copy of Handout 4, Notes on Presentations, to each student. Inform students that they need to take notes on each group’s presentation and turn this in at the end of the class period.

3. Allow four to five minutes for each group to share a summary of their research to the rest of the class.

4. Once all groups have presented, distribute one copy of Handout 5, Post-Lesson Quiz, to each student. Allow students five minutes to complete the handout.

5. If time allows, ask students to share the correct answers to Handout 5. The correct responses are on Answer Key 2, Post-Lesson Quiz; you can project this answer key to the class if desired.

6. Collect Handout 4 and Handout 5 from each student for assessment.

Extension

If you would like your students to apply what they learned during this discussion guide to a contemporary famine, assign the following activity:

Identify a current area in the world that is experiencing famine. Write an op-ed piece to a local publication (print or online) that addresses the following points:

- Why should people in your country care about this famine?
- What caused this famine?
- What is at least one action that your country’s government and/or individuals could take to address the famine?

Assessment

The following are suggestions for assessing student work in this lesson:

1. Evaluate student responses to Handout 2, Video Notes, based on Answer Key 1, Video Notes.

2. Evaluate the accuracy of students’ notes on Handout 4, Notes on Presentations.

3. Evaluate student responses to Handout 5, Post-Lesson Quiz, based on Answer Key 2, Post-Lesson Quiz. Alternatively, ask students to write a short reflection on how much their knowledge grew from the pre-lesson quiz to the post-lesson quiz.

4. Assess student participation in group and class discussions, evaluating their ability to
   - clearly state their opinions, questions, and/or answers;
   - provide thoughtful answers;
   - exhibit sensitivity toward different cultures and ideas;
   - respect and acknowledge other students’ comments; and
   - ask relevant and insightful questions.
PRE-LESSON QUIZ

Take 10 minutes to answer the questions below to the best of your ability. There’s no penalty for incorrect answers and you don’t need to turn this handout in. This is simply a way to gauge your current level of understanding of topics covered in this lesson so that you can see how much you learn by the end.

1. What’s the definition of the word “famine”?

2. What are the main causes of famines?

3. What was the American Relief Administration (ARA)?

4. What was the worst famine in recorded history in terms of lives lost?

5. How does famine across the world affect your life?

6. What are some ways you personally can help reduce global hunger and avert future famines around the world?
VIDEO NOTES

You are about to watch a 21-minute video from Dr. Bertrand Patenaude, historian at Stanford University and research fellow at the Hoover Institution. In this video, Dr. Patenaude provides an overview of the research into famines. He explains how the main causes of famine have shifted over time and why famines still exist despite all the prosperity and technology in today’s world. The video walks through the largest famines of the 20th century and this century and explains which areas are most susceptible to famine now. Dr. Patenaude ends with a cautionary note about why the frequency of famines may increase and where future famines are most likely to occur.

Use the space below to answer each question; you may want to take notes on another sheet of paper as you watch the video.

Warning: This video contains several disturbing images of people affected by famine, including young children.

1. Why does Dr. Patenaude state that “famine is making a comeback”?

2. Why had observers previously believed that famine was becoming extinct?

3. What’s the definition of famine?

4. What caused the Soviet Famine of 1921–1922?

5. What is the difference between “old famines” and “new famines”? When did new famines emerge?
6. What are the three most fatal famines since 1900 and what do they have in common?

7. What is the main cause of death in most famines?

8. How can we help prevent further famines?

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**KEY TERMS (in order of mention)**

- **famine**—an extreme event in which a large number of people in a given population or geographic area suffer inadequate access to food, usually because their livelihoods have been damaged or destroyed. This leads to widespread malnutrition, ill health, and death.

- **Horn of Africa**—a peninsula in East Africa composed of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti

- **Gulf of Aden**—an arm of the Indian Ocean between Yemen and Somalia connecting on the west with the Red Sea

- **supply chain**—the chain of processes, businesses, and activities involved in producing and distributing a product

- **acute food insecurity**—when a person’s inability to consume adequate food puts their lives or livelihoods in immediate danger

- **Soviet Russia**—name used to refer to Russia between the October Revolution of 1917 and the creation of the Soviet Union (or USSR) in 1922

- **American Relief Administration (ARA)**—American large-scale relief mission to Europe and Russia after World War I

- **scythe**—an implement used for mowing grass, grain, or other crops and composed of a long curving blade fastened at an angle to a long handle

- **Volga River**—longest river in Europe, flowing from Central Russia into the Caspian Sea and draining most of Western Russia

- **hunger edema**—swelling of the stomach caused by starvation

- **Communist**—referring to a theoretical economic system characterized by the collective ownership of property and by the organization of labor for the common advantage of all members
totalitarian—referring to a form of government in which the ruler is an absolute dictator (not restricted by a constitution, laws, or opposition, etc.)

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR or Soviet Union)—a federation of 15 republics governed by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as a single state from 1922 to 1991

collectivization—the process of organizing (something) on the basis of ownership by the people or the state, abolishing private ownership or involvement

Holodomor—Ukrainian term for the famine in Soviet Ukraine from 1932 to 1933 that killed millions of Ukrainians

Great Leap Famine—the famine in China that resulted from the policies of Mao Zedong’s Great Leap Forward

Great Leap Forward—the disastrous attempt by the People’s Republic of China to modernize agriculture by labor-intensive methods from 1958 to 1960; resulted in massive famine

typhus—any of various bacterial diseases caused by rickettsia and characterized by high recurrent fever

cholera—an acute infectious diarrheal disease caused by certain strains of the Vibrio cholerae bacterium through ingestion of contaminated water or food

typhoid—a communicable disease marked especially by fever, diarrhea, prostration, headache, and intestinal inflammation and caused by a bacterium

Dysentery—a disease characterized by severe diarrhea with passage of mucus and blood and usually caused by infection

Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET)—a leading provider of early warning and analysis on acute food insecurity around the world. FEWS NET was established in 1985 by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).
FAMINE RESEARCH PROJECT

Research a historical famine or an ongoing famine and prepare a presentation to your class summarizing what you learned. One or two members of your group will share your summary during the next class period.

First, choose one of the famines below to research.

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<tr>
<th>20TH CENTURY FAMINES</th>
<th>21ST CENTURY FAMINES</th>
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<tr>
<td>3. Bengal* (1943)</td>
<td>3. Horn of Africa (early 2020s)</td>
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<td>4. Great Leap Famine (China)</td>
<td>4. Sudan?</td>
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<td>6. Ethiopia (1980s)</td>
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<td>7. North Korea* (1990s)</td>
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*The famines with an asterisk were not mentioned in the video.*

Answer the following questions for your chosen case:
1. What was the geographic extent of this famine? Who were the main victims?
2. What were the main causes of this famine? Would you classify it as an old or new famine?
3. How did the famine end? Which groups helped end it?
4. What were the lessons learned from this famine, if any?
5. What sources did you consult to answer these questions?

Prepare your presentation as a group and choose one or two spokespeople to share during the next class period.

Your teacher will evaluate your response based on the following criteria:
- How clearly did you state the causes of the famine?
- How effectively did you substantiate the causes of the famine?
- How clearly did you state the reasons the famine ended and lessons to be learned?
- How credible and trusted were the sources you relied on?
# Notes on Presentations

Use the table below to take notes on your classmates’ presentations summarizing other famines. Your teacher will collect this handout for assessment.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>Famine Location</th>
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POST-LESSON QUIZ

Take 10 minutes to answer the questions below. These are the same questions you answered in Handout 1, Pre-Lesson Quiz, at the start of the lesson. You should find that you have learned a lot about famine since the pre-lesson quiz.

1. What’s the definition of the word “famine”?

2. What are the main causes of famines?

3. What was the American Relief Administration (ARA)?

4. What was the worst famine in recorded history in terms of lives lost?

5. How does famine across the world affect your life?

6. What are some ways you personally can help reduce global hunger and avert future famines around the world?
1. Why does Dr. Patenaude state that “famine is making a comeback”?
After many years without a serious famine, there was a moderate to major famine in Somalia in 2011, in which about 260,000 people died. Following this, there were several famine near-misses in places like Somalia and also Yemen. Then, the number of acutely food insecure people around the world went up with the outbreak of COVID-19 and has continued to increase through the pandemic and beyond. Things could get much worse very quickly if climate change continues to worsen, as it appears to be doing at an alarming rate.

2. Why had observers previously believed that famine was becoming extinct?
The frequency of famines decreased significantly between the 1980s and 2011, due to a combination of technological advances in food production and distribution, economic growth, and robust global humanitarianism. This led to a belief that famines had been vanquished for good.

3. What’s the definition of famine?
According to one expert, famine is “an extreme event in which many people in a given population or geographic area suffer inadequate access to food, usually because their livelihoods have been damaged or destroyed. This leads to widespread malnutrition, ill health, and death.”

4. What caused the Soviet Famine of 1921–1922?
There were several causes:
• Dislocations from the First World War, 1914 to 1918
• There were two revolutions in Russia in 1917 that caused great disruption
• This was followed by a civil war in Russia from 1918 to 1920
• The Soviet Communist government under Vladimir Lenin confiscated grain from the peasants
• A drought hit the country in 1920–21 at a time when the peasants had no reserve of grain to fall back on

5. What is the difference between “old famines” and “new famines”? When did new famines emerge?
Old famines were those caused by some event related to climate, such as drought, flooding, pests, plant diseases, or something else in the environment that resulted in crop failures. These “old famines” have occurred throughout human history but have become less common since the dawn of the 20th century.
New famines are those triggered by political crises, wars, conflict, and totalitarian or authoritarian rule. These started at the beginning of the 20th century and remain the major cause of famines today.
6. **Which are the three most fatal famines in recorded history and what do they have in common?**
   1. The Soviet famine of 1921–1922
   2. The Soviet famine of 1932–1933
   3. The Great Leap Famine in China in the late 1950s and early 1960s
   All three of these famines stemmed from efforts by Communist leaders (Lenin and Stalin in the USSR, Mao Zedong in China) to confiscate grain from peasants and/or force them onto collective farms.

7. **What is the main cause of death in most famines?**
   Most people caught up in a famine do not die of starvation; they die of disease. Severe malnutrition makes people, particularly young children, susceptible to becoming ill and catching diseases.

8. **How can we help prevent further famines?**
   Residents of the United States live in a society with an abundance of food, so we can contribute to humanitarian efforts to alleviate mass starvation, support long-term solutions to global hunger and inequity, and fight climate change.
POST-LESSON QUIZ

1. What’s the definition of the word “famine”?
Dr. Patenaude defined famine as “an extreme event in which a large number of people in a given population or geographic area suffer inadequate access to food, usually because their livelihoods have been damaged or destroyed. This leads to widespread malnutrition, ill health, and death.”

2. What are the main causes of famines?
Historically, climate-related events such as drought, flooding, pests, plant diseases, or something else in the environment that resulted in crop failures led to famines. Since the start of the 20th century, however, political crises, wars, conflict, and totalitarian or authoritarian rule have caused most famines.

3. What was the American Relief Administration (ARA)?
The American Relief Administration (ARA) was a large-scale relief mission to Europe established by the United States after World War I. The ARA entered Soviet Russia to provide relief when famine struck the newly founded country in 1921.

4. What was the worst famine in recorded history in terms of lives lost?
The worst famine in history in terms of lives lost was the Great Leap Famine in China in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The estimated total number of deaths in this famine ranges from 15 million to 45 million.

5. How does famine across the world affect your life?
Student responses will vary; potential examples include:
• Ethically, we have enough prosperity and abundance in our world that no one should have to die because of famine.
• Our world is interconnected, and famine elsewhere can cause larger conflict such as civil strife, mass migration, ecological destruction, and the spread of communicable disease.

6. What are some ways you personally can help reduce global hunger and avert future famines around the world?
Student responses will vary; potential examples include:
• Contribute to humanitarian efforts to alleviate mass starvation
• Support long-term solutions to global hunger and inequity
• Fight climate change
“Famine in the Modern World”
Dr. Bertrand Patenaude, Stanford University

My name is Bert Patenaude. I teach history here at Stanford University. And at Stanford, I teach a seminar called “Famine in the Modern World.” Now, lately, the enrollments in that seminar, the number of students signing up to take it, that’s on the rise. And I think it’s because, in part because, famine is making a comeback.

So have a look at the map that I put up for you to look at, very recently made map. And until recently, most observers thought famine was becoming extinct through a combination of technological advances in food production and distribution, also economic growth, and a robust global humanitarianism. Through that combined—those combined forces—it appeared that famine was finally becoming a thing of the past.

But then, in 2011, there was a famine in Somalia. You see it there, if you look in your map, in the extreme east of Africa, the Horn of Africa. Somalia in 2011—a moderate to major famine—told us that the outlook was too optimistic. That, in fact, famine was not going away. In that 2011 famine in Somalia, 260,000 people died, more than half of them under the age of five. Now the population of Somalia back in 2011, 13 million. Today, it’s 17 million. But this is a sizable amount, a quarter of a million people out of a population of 13 million. So this is what that famine looks like. This is what a young famine victim looks like. We’ll see more such photos in the few minutes ahead. Since 2011, there have been a couple of more famines declared in Africa. And very importantly, there were several near misses in places like Somalia and also Yemen.

If you look again back at your map, you will see across from Somalia, across the Gulf of Aden, you will see Yemen, still a very troubled spot. Okay. Then comes COVID-19, the pandemic, which really comes into fruition in 2020. And the effects of COVID-19 on economies and on supply chains had many people, many observers of famine, beginning to fear the worst when it came to what we call acute food insecurity. And the effects of COVID-19 have actually proven to be enduring. And the numbers of acutely food insecure people, and that’s around the world, have continued to increase through the pandemic and beyond. And now, today, in 2023, the war in Ukraine, which broke out a year ago, is threatening to disrupt food supplies and the stability of the global food market. So that’s the big picture trajectory.

Let’s start with a basic question: What is famine? What causes it? And why is it seemingly a rising threat once again? Famine can be defined, as it is by one expert in the field, and I quote, as “an extreme event in which a large number of people in a given population or geographic area suffers inadequate access to food, usually because their livelihoods have been damaged or destroyed. This leads to widespread malnutrition, ill health, and death.” So that’s a pretty good technical definition. And what I’m going to do now with these next few slides is illustrate that and sort of bring it home to you, give you a real sense of what famine looks like and what causes famine. And to do that, I’m going to take you on a little excursion.

I am a research fellow, actually, at the Hoover Institution Library & Archives here on the Stanford campus. And in that capacity I served as curator of an exhibition, still ongoing. As you see here from the slide, it’s called “Bread and Medicine,” and it focuses on a famine that happened 100 years ago in Soviet Russia and Ukraine. So we’re talking about 1921 to 22, mostly. There was a massive famine, and there was a massive American relief effort undertaken by an
organization called the American Relief Administration. And the papers of that organization are located in the Hoover Archives here in the Stanford campus. And those papers serve as the basis for the exhibition.

So I’m going to show you some images from the exhibition, give you a sense of what famine looks like. We start with a poster. This is a poster put out by the Soviet government in Moscow back in the summer of 1921, when it was becoming clear that a major famine was looming. That’s Russian script there, Russian language, and what it says is, “Stop this flow of the starving through your comradely aid.” So essentially, what they’re telling people is, we’ve got to stop the tide, the flood of refugees. And you can see these people have left their homes, they’ve abandoned their homes way in the background. You see famine represented by a skeleton with a scythe there, that’s death. And these refugees are spreading disease throughout the country, so beyond the so-called famine zone. And by the way, I’ll have a map up for you in a moment, many of these people are heading to Ukraine, the breadbasket of Russia in the old days. They think they’re going to find salvation there.

Now let’s show you what this really looks like. When the American relief workers arrive in September of 1921, they are in the Volga River valley. And again, I’ll show you on the map in a moment, and the Americans come upon many scenes such as this one that autumn of 1921. People are waiting for a train, trying to get out of town, trying to flee the famine. The Americans also run into scenes such as this. And I’m going lightly on the horror imagery here, as we do in the exhibition. So there are millions of orphans already in the fall of 1921, and many end up in these so-called children’s homes, where as you can see, there’s very little in the way of food, blankets, places to sleep, and it’s also a place where disease is spread, right. So one more photo that’s a little difficult to look at. And you see these five children here. This is also in the Volga region in Samara.

And there’s a caption written on the front of the photo. You see the emaciation. So you can actually see the rib cage on a couple of these kids. But also look at the swollen bellies, the so-called hunger edema. These kids are eating food substitutes. There’s no real food to eat. They’re eating grass, clay, twigs, leaves, bark, ground up bones, and a lot worse than that, anything they could find to stay alive.

Okay, what caused that famine back in Russia and Ukraine a century ago? Well, it starts with dislocations of the First World War, 1914 to 1918. There is a revolution, actually two revolutions, in Russia in 1917. So great disruption. Then there’s a civil war, 1918 to 1920. And very often forgotten, and I’ll come back to this later, the Soviet Communist government under Vladimir Lenin is confiscating grain from the peasants. This means that when the drought hits, which is 1920–21, the peasants have no reserve of grain to fall back on, and it’s a major famine. At least six million people will perish in this famine of 1921–22.

Now the experts on famine today are pretty clear on a few things, and this is one of them, that we have to think about famines in terms of old famines and new famines. Old famines were those caused by some event related to climate. Might be drought, might be floods, something in the environment, pests, plant diseases, et cetera. And that this resulted in crop failures that led to famine. So those are sort of old fashioned or old famines.

New famines, on the other hand, begin with the start of the 20th century. And those famines, and those are the ones we live with today, tend to be triggered by political crises, wars, civil wars, so some sort of violent conflict, and also totalitarian rule, authoritarian rule. And that’s the story with the famine whose victims you’re looking at in this slide. After World War I, there was widespread hunger across Europe. But only in Soviet Russia with a Communist government in charge was there mass starvation. So genuine famine.
Here’s the map that I promised you. You see here, we called it Soviet Russia back in those days. It’s actually a complicated administrative setup. But you see to the lower left that there is a Ukraine there, actually technically independent Ukraine back in 1921. It’s connected to the government in Moscow, the Russian government. And, of course, you see down on the Black Sea, the port of Odessa. And by the way, this map uses the older spellings. We’ve updated these since Ukrainian has become a respected language, right? So you see Kiev there? It’s now Kyiv. Odessa only has one S, and here on the map, it has two. That’s the port of Odessa that Ukraine uses to export grain and other agricultural products. And it’s under threat today. I’ll come back to that at the very end.

Now, don’t lose me here. A decade later, we can still use this map, a decade later, this place became known as the Soviet Union, the USSR. And there would be a second, another catastrophic famine, this is 1932–33. The Soviet leader is at the time Joseph Stalin. And Stalin introduces the collectivization of agriculture, drive all the peasants onto collective farms. There is resistance and the furor and the disorder leads to mass starvation. And Stalin’s government policies actually exacerbate that famine, especially in Ukraine. And today that famine where millions, probably four to five million Ukrainians died, is remembered there as the Holodomor, a Ukrainian word which means “killing by starvation.” Kind of a sacred term for Ukrainians.

So we have two big Soviet famines caused in part by politics in the 20th century, but the biggest of them all, as measured by the loss of human life certainly, the most catastrophic famine of the 20th century, was in China. And that’s the so-called Great Leap Famine, which starts in the late 1950s when Mao Zedong and the Communists attempt to—sounds like Stalin, right?—attempt to move peasants onto communes in an effort to industrialize the country. That program is called the Great Leap Forward, so the famine that resulted is called the Great Leap Famine. It lasts until about 1962. Now the estimated total number of deaths, brace yourselves, ranges from 15 million—that’s the low, low, low side—to 45 million people died in this famine. So that’s the benchmark for the really bad famines of the recent period of the new famines.

As totalitarian governments fade away toward the end of the 20th century, episodes of famine also decline, as does the number of people dying from them. I would stress one point here that’s often missed when people discuss famine, and that is most people caught up in a famine do not die of outright starvation. In fact, they die of famine-related disease, infectious disease. It’s mostly because severe malnutrition makes people, especially young children, who are the first victims in a famine, it makes them more susceptible to disease. As I said earlier, in that Somalia famine in 2011, half the victims were under the age of five years old.

So when the Americans go into Soviet Russia they are on the lookout for the major disease killers there: typhus, cholera, typhoid, dysentery. And while they bring in food into kitchens—and this is a great photo here, rural kitchen—that’s American food that’s going to be served there in 1922. While they bring in food, they also realize they have to fight disease. And so they introduce a medical program with a large scale vaccination campaign, primarily to ward off cholera. And the children you see here in this photo, this is—today we call the city St. Petersburg—this is an American kitchen. These kids are waiting to get their daily meal, but first they have to get their shot, right? So they had an inducement to get vaccinated.

So a couple of general observations, and then we’ll wind up. Incidences of famine were long thought to be related to population growth. The idea was that population growth was always outpacing technological advances in production. So famines occurred as a kind of course correction, nature’s way of reducing the world’s population to a more manageable size. Recent work of historians has demonstrated that, in fact, there’s no direct relationship between famine
and population size going back at least 150 years. Also famine has long been associated with some sort of natural disaster: drought, flood, crop or animal disease, et cetera. So usually it was presented back in the old times as an act of God, a kind of biblical event. But in fact, as we’ve seen, most famines are caused by a combination of factors. And today, the most common causal factor in almost all famines or near famine emergencies is war or conflict of some kind.

Okay, so we’ll end where we started with the Horn of Africa. One of the developments that grew out of the famine in Ethiopia, which you actually see on the map here, the double map, the famine in Ethiopia in the 1980s was one of the last of the major famines, probably the last in the 20th century. That gave birth to the idea of creating a famine early warning system. The idea being you could track the causal factors and predict when and where famines were likely to occur. And if you could do that, it would inspire intervention either to head off the famine or provide humanitarian aid to people under threat. And the best known of these early warning efforts is U.S.-funded, and it’s known as the Famine Early Warning System Network or FEWS NET. You see the name in the lower left part of the slide. It began in 1985. They have a terrific website, which is where I got these maps, and you can get many others and you can track these situations.

So finally, 2022 sees a rise in the number of, numbers of, acutely food insecure people. Today, the total is somewhere around 200 million. And again, COVID-19 and the rise of food prices that result from the pandemic is part of that. The Ukraine war still is a wild card and still could disrupt food supplies worldwide because Ukraine is a major supplier of grain. Before World War I, it was known as the granary of Europe. But—and I will end on a sober or a sobering note—things could get much worse very quickly if climate change continues to worsen, as it appears to be doing at an alarming rate. We may think that finding the political will to end famine, keeping the peace, preventing violent conflict, will keep famine at bay. But we must be alert to the dangers of climate change.

So look at the map of the Horn of Africa. You can see this is the weak spot, this is the vulnerable spot. And it is now, this part of the world, is now suffering its fifth poor rainy season in a row, which has no precedent in recorded history. The worst of it on that map is southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. And this is worth keeping an eye on. And we finish by zooming in here on Somalia, which once again since last September, has been on the brink of famine, as this FEWS NET map shows us. And so we’ll be keeping an eye on that as we go forward.

But for all of us Americans, especially young Americans, famine is an issue that should be a concern to us. In a world where everything is interconnected, we need to be paying attention to the state of affairs with famine. We in the United States, where we have an abundance of food, can respond by supporting humanitarian efforts to alleviate mass starvation. But much more effective and certainly more humane would be to focus on the issues of global hunger and inequity to look for long-term solutions to these problems. And I would say that fighting climate change is essential to this effort.